SEPT. 1945

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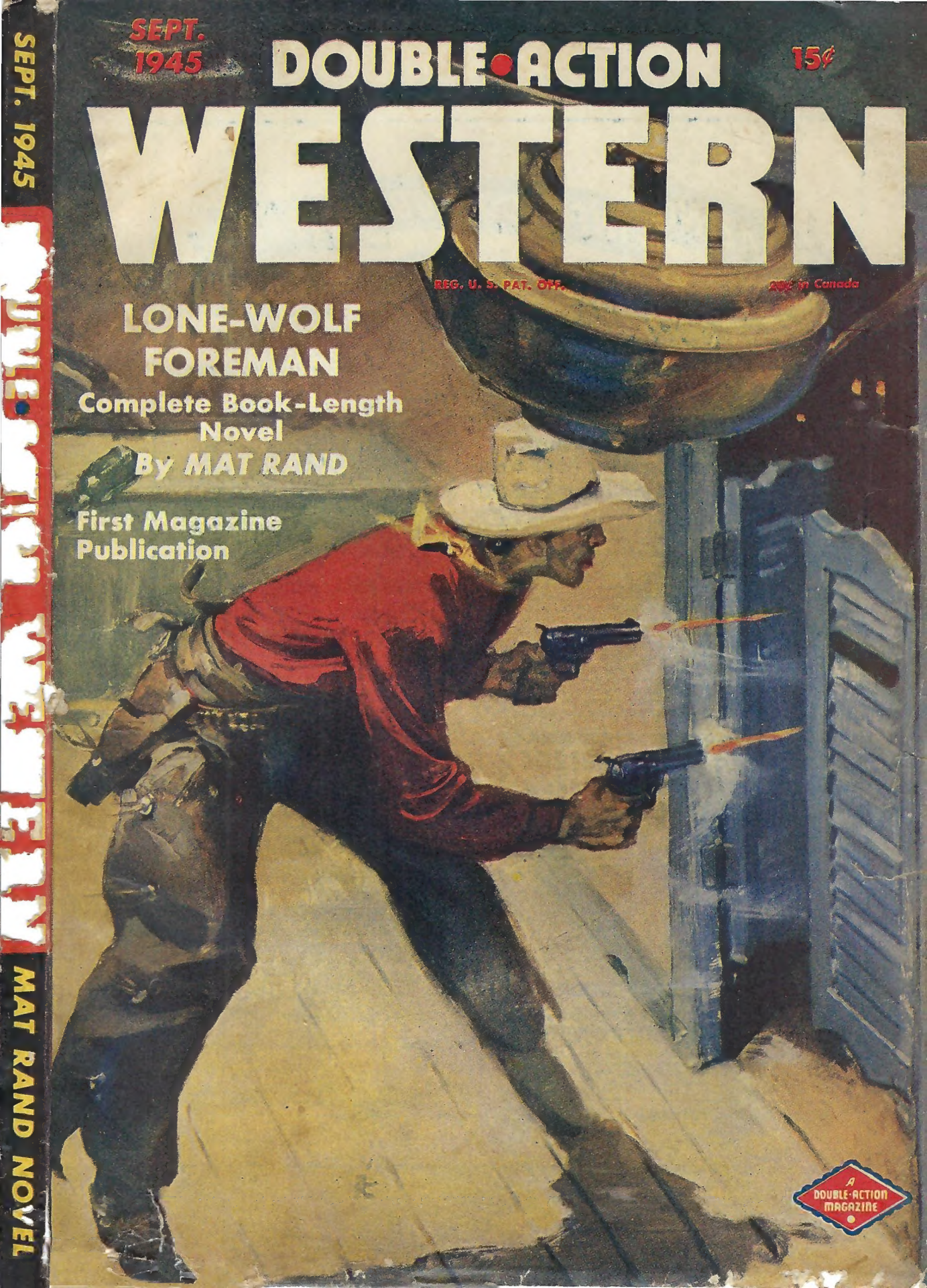
LONE-WOLF FOREMAN

Complete Book-Length Novel

By MAT RAND

First Magazine Publication



A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

SEPT. 1945 DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN MAT RAND NOVEL

AMAZING INTRODUCTORY OFFER!

Do You Want Longer Hair?

MAKE THIS EASY 7-DAY TEST...

FULLY GUARANTEED

LONGER HAIR Dresses Better ***In Latest Styles***

★ ★ ★ THEN TRY THIS PROVEN EASY SYSTEM ON YOUR HAIR

... *Helps Prevent Brittle Ends From Breaking Off!*

HERE IS THRILLING NEW HOPE for millions who want their dry, lusterless, unruly, brittle and breaking off hair more lovely ... longer. The Juelene **SYSTEM** has helped men and women all over the nation to find new happiness and confidence in more beautiful, healthy appearing hair. Yes, **hair may get longer**—the scalp and hair condition being otherwise normal—if the breaking-off process of dry, brittle ends can be retarded. That's why Juelene is such a natural way to help your hair gain its normal beauty. This wonderful **SYSTEM** helps relieve hair dryness that is caused by lack of natural oils. It helps soften harsh, brittle ends, thus giving your hair a chance to get longer once the breaking-off and the splitting ends have been curbed. If your hair is dry, rough and hard to keep neat, try the easy Juelene SYSTEM for just 7 days. See if Juelene's tendency to soften harsh, difficult-to-manage hair can help yours to become softer, silkier, more lustrous than it has been before—**in just one short week!** You may win compliments from both men and women who admire and envy your hair in its new lovely beauty.

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TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

Cover by A. Leslie Ross *Robert W. Lowndes, Editor*

Volume 12 **September, 1945** **Number 2**

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

(First Magazine Publication)

LONE-WOLF FOREMAN . . . . . By Mat Rand 10

The Bar D was a rich spread, and everyone seemed to be taking turns in trying to swindle its owner, lovely Jane Denny. And Dick Jardine, engineer, who had saved Jane from outlaws, apparently was no exception to this rule!

SHORT STORIES

SATAN'S BULLET TRIO . . By Charles D. Richardson, Jr. 79

It was a right slick scheme Dean Hawk had — a bit too slick for his own comfort!

CANDIDATE FOR BOOTHILL. . . . . By T. W. Ford 85

Hondo Huget couldn't have guessed the hangrope danger he was riding into that day he recognized Duke Benoir in unflattering circumstances!

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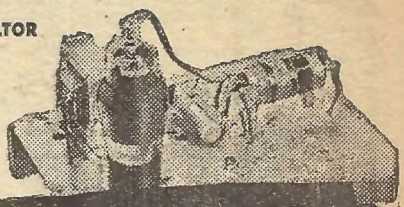

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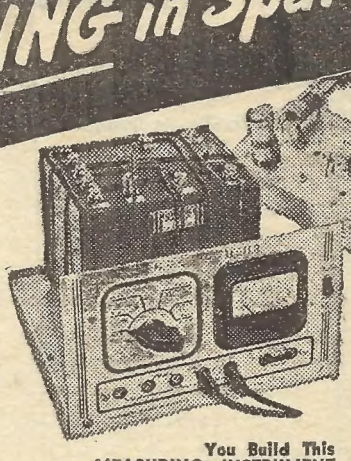

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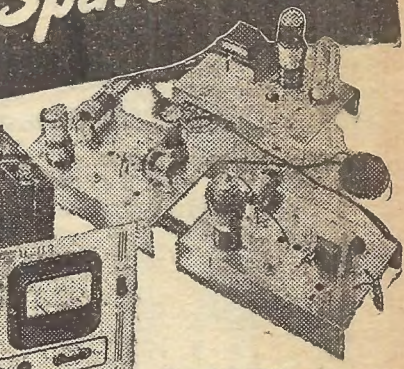

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NAME .....

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CHAPTER I

THE foreman, Gosden, turned the corner of the bunkhouse and stopped. Jane Denny had appeared on the gallery of the ranch house forty yards away. A smile, partly of admiration, came to Gosden's lean, weathered face.

He saw standing there a girl of medium height wearing a short-skirted riding habit of meadow green. She was his boss, the owner of the spread. The riding habit was becoming to her, for it matched the tinge of green in her blue eyes, and contrasted nicely with the coppery shadows in

Everyone seemed to be out to swindle lovely Jane Denny, owner of the prosperous Bar D spread — even the man who rescued her from hold-up bandits!

LONE-WOLF FOREMAN

By Mat Rand

her dark hair. He knew there was a green band on her Stetson hat, though he could not see it because of the shadow.

"Frank!" she called.

"Yeah?" drawled the foreman.

"Tell Pancho to bring my horse. I want him right away."

After giving the order to the Mexican roustabout, Gosden crossed the yard, stood at the foot of the steps.

"Mornin', Miss Jane."

"Good morning, Frank," she replied with a smile. "Were you about ready to start for the range?"

"Yeah, I was goin' for my horse."

"Which way today?"

He replied that he was going to ride southward along the foothills of the towering San Miguel Mountains

First Magazine Publication of This Complete Book-Length Novel

that formed the western boundary of the vast Bar D Bar range.

"Anything special down that way, Frank?"

"Just want to take a look at the grass," he answered. "Want to see what stock is down that way, too. You goin' to town?"

"I'm going to Escarpa."

His face showed surprise.

"You don't mean—"

"Yes, I'm taking the two thousand dollars to Kilpatrick at Escarpa," she said, and her red lips compressed.

Gosden's countenance sobered and seemed to express displeasure. He knew why she owed two thousand dollars to John Kilpatrick. Two weeks ago she had bought some blooded cattle from the Escarpa rancher.

"Why don't you send him a check, Miss Jane?"

She regarded him narrowly, perhaps with a little impatience.

"Have you reason to suspect that I will be held up, Frank?"

"Reason?" he ejaculated. "Of course not, but you've got to ride through some wild country to get to Escarpa."

"And if I do get held up?" she smiled.

He did not answer at once, but as he looked at her he took note of the cartridge belt about her supple waist and the light, long-barreled Colt in the embossed holster at her left side.

"I wish you'd let me send Buck Thomas along with you, Miss Jane."

Again Jane's chin lifted, and this time there was actual impatience in her wide-set eyes.

"I don't want Buck Thomas or anybody else, Frank. If I'm held up, I'll be held up, and that's all there is to it."

"If you're robbed, you'll be out a couple of thousand dollars."

"Well, I can get another two thousand."

He knew she was rich, and he knew, too, that she was stubborn and reckless.

"But if you should be harmed, Miss Jane—"

She laughed now, touching the handle of the thirty-eight.

"I don't think I'll be harmed, Frank."

"Maybe not, but I got a hunch it ain't just safe for you to make this ride with that much money."

"Well, I'm willing to run the risk, Frank, though as far as that goes, I don't think the risk is very great."

"You're your own boss." The foreman shrugged. "But if I'd known you was goin' to do this today—"

JANE eyed him sternly. "You did know. I told you day before yesterday that I was going to do it, Frank, and you didn't offer any objection then."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. But I didn't think you meant it then. Now if you'd just mail Kilpatrick a check—"

"I don't want to mail him a check," she declared. "Besides, I do want to make the trip. I won't be back before tomorrow night."

Gosden smiled reluctant agreement, and said:

"You're the boss, of course."

"Yes; and now here comes Pancho with my horse." She took the reins of the shortcoupled, restive sorrel the roustabout brought, then gave Gosden some orders he silently resented.

"Sure hope you don't ride into any trouble," he muttered.

"If I do I'll ride out of it," she retorted, and swung to the saddle.

"If it would please you to have me ride with you, *senorita,*" began Pancho. He touched the brim of his steepled straw sombrero.

"Thank you, Pancho, but I am sure I can make the trip safely alone."

Range boss and roustabout watched the girl ride away.

"She's a damned fool," Gosden muttered.

"Hah! She is not!" contradicted Pancho, and his black eyes flashed.

"She's got the swell-head," went on the foreman. "Some day that hat of hers'll turn out a heap too little."

"That is not true!" cried the Mexican youth. "Her *cabeza* is the ver' beautiful!"

"You get back to your work!" Gosden ordered. The roustabout went, but with fire in his brain. He had never liked Gosden. Now he hated him.

"Cabron!" he muttered. "This would be the fine place if Gosden, he would lose him his job!'

As for Frank Gosden, he had no fear of losing his job. For eleven years he had been range boss for Jane's father, and it had been almost the dying wish of the rancher that he should keep his job.

As he rode away from the home place Gosden hated Jane Denny, because she had a will of her own, because she had more money and range and stock than any person should own. With this hate was vast and bitter disappointment.

Gosden gave much sober consideration to a thought that had been in his mind for weeks. He growled a curse under his breath.

"It's time she learned her lesson," he told himself at length. "What'd do her a lot of good would be to be subtracted from a wad of her money. And I might just as well have a share of it."

LIKE the majority of the big ranches, the Bar D Bar controlled a vast acreage by ownership of waterholes and strips of land along the many small creeks. By noon Gosden had passed the last section of land that Jane Denny actually owned.

Half an hour later he turned into a trail that followed a creek toward the mountains. Heretofore Gosden had paid scant attention to earth formations. Now he noticed the metamorphic rocks at the sides of the canyon, noticed that they were twisted and folded as if some terrific force had kneaded them while they were still white-hot and plastic. Presently he was out of this formation and entering one of granite and limestone with occasional intrusions of igneous rock.

"Durned if I don't wish I knew more about minin'," he grumbled.

About an hour after he had turned into the dim trail, his nostrils caught the tang of wood smoke. He smiled, and muttered:

"I sure hope Conrad's gettin' dinner."

Rounding a point, he saw a small flat shaded with cottonwoods and sycamores. At the left a creek brawled. In the middle of the flat was a small, soiled tent. Before the tent a man stood beside a fire. Stocky and burly, the man wore faded overalls and faded cotton shirt. His thick blond hair was long and unkempt. His heavy features lighted as he turned.

"Hello, Gosden," he cried in a thick, guttural voice. "Just about in time you are."

"Howdy, Conrad," the Bar D Bar foreman returned as he stopped his horse. "Smelled your grub down the canyon a piece."

"Damned poor grub! Just sowbelly and flapjacks and coffee. I got the idea that a hard-working man like myself is entitled to better than this."

Gosden dismounted, and surveyed the meager camp, the few mining tools scattered about.

"I think you are," he agreed. "And

damned if I don't think I'm entitled to more wages than I draw, too."

Ells' little blue eyes became curious and keen above their pouched lower lids. He tugged at an end of his heavy blond mustache.

"How much wages do you draw, Gosden?"

"Seventy-five a month and found."

When Gosden returned from picketing his horse where it could get at the gramma grass, Ells had a blackish lump in his right hand. He extended it, saying:

"What you think of this, Gosden?"

The range boss took the lump, felt its unusual weight, and that it was vaguely greasy to the touch of his calloused fingers.

"What you call it?"

"Silver sulphide," Ells returned without enthusiasm. "If you look close you'll see there's a little horn and ruby in it."

Gosden looked again at the rock, then at the prospector.

"What's it worth to the ton?"

Ells uttered a thick, unenthusiastic laugh.

"It's worth plenty to the ton; but there ain't a ton of it."

"That's all right, said Gosden after a minute. "Here, take it, and don't be so downhearted."

"Why shouldn't I be? Here I work for months, and all I've got to show for it is less than a wheelbarrow load of ore!"

"All as good as this, Conrad?"

Ells spat. "That's the hell of it! There ain't a quarter of it as good as this piece, Gosden." He flung the specimen to the ground, and laughed shortly. "Squat and eat. Guess I got plenty cooked for us both."

THEY talked little while they ate, but Ells was puzzled by the vague, knowing smile that came now and then to Gosden's thin-lipped mouth. He curbed his curiosity until he had tamped black tobacco into the bowl of a black pipe.

"What's so funny about this setup?" he demanded as he puffed angrily. "You act like somethin' was funny to you."

"We're goin' to sell this mine of yours," said the foreman.

"Huh? What?" Ells jerked the pipe from his mouth, then put it back. "But it ain't worth anything! Who is there fool enough to buy a prospect that ain't got a wheelbarrow load of ore?"

Gosden explained soberly that they would sell the prospect to Jane Denny for fifty thousand dollars.

"But she's your boss! She's the woman you work for!" Ells protested. "She pays you your wages, Gosden."

"Sure she does!" The foreman's laugh was brittle. "That's why it's time I learned her a lesson."

As Ells continued to listen, his heavy, bleached eyebrows lifted and his eyes filled with wonder.

"But do you mean this, man? Are you talkin' sense, man, or is this—"

"It's sense!" Gosden snapped.

The prospector's lids narrowed furtively.

"And if you sell this here mine, how much do you expect to get out of it?"

"Half!" declared the Bar D Bar range boss. "You admit it ain't worth anything, and if you get twenty-five thousand out of it you ought to be satisfied!"

After a few moments of study, Ells chuckled deep in his thick chest.

"But can you do it, Gosden?"

The range boss smiled. He waved with his right hand.

"See that there horse of mine, Conrad?"

"Sure, I see. What about him?"

Gosden rolled and lit a cigarette. He inhaled deeply, blowing smoke through his narrow nostrils. Though his eyes were cold, there was a smile on his lean face.

"Conrad, if you and me don't subtract fifty thousand from that girl, I'll eat that there horse!"

CHAPTER II

THOUGH lonely since her father's death—her mother had died years before—Jane Denny was proud of being the sole owner of

a large and prosperous cattle ranch. Now as she rode along the foothills she was indignant because of the advice Gosden had offered. Of course he could boss the actual ranging of the cattle, as he had done for her father, but when it came to telling her how she should pay her bills, that was another matter.

It was about eleven o'clock when she dismounted at a spring near the foot of a spur that extended westward from the main San Miguel range.

Escarpa lay in a valley at the northerly side of the range. Jane had her choice of two routes. One was to round the spur and keep to comparatively easy going. The other and shorter route was through a rocky pass in the spur. It was this route she chose.

She stood beside the sorrel horse, tightening the cinch of the saddle.

"I wonder what made Frank think I might be molested on this ride?" she asked herself. "There hasn't been even rustling on this range for five years."

For perhaps ten minutes she tried to analyze Gosden, to discover whether he had done or said anything to arouse suspicion or distrust. She shook her head. There was nothing for which she could blame her range boss except the too frequent offering of advice.

She knew she would have a hard time running the ranch without Gosden or somebody else with equal ability and experience.

Jane became impatient when the sense of uneasiness persisted with her. It was not that she was frightened, but rather that she had assumed a grave responsibility in taking the two thousand dollars to Kilpatrick. After all, perhaps it might have been wiser to have sent a check as Gosden had suggested. Then she lifted her chin and shook her dark head.

"No, it wouldn't," she decided. "I'm going to take it through or bust a cinch."

Presently she sang a little as the sorrel climbed, to decide whether the sound of her own voice would banish her disquiet. Suddenly she ceased singing, and stared.

There in the crooked, rough trail were the fresh tracks of a shod horse. Jane reined in, and turned to survey the route behind her. She saw where the tracks came in from the left.

"Now I wonder whose tracks those are?" she asked herself, doubting that one of her own riders could have been there only an hour or two before. They could have been made by somebody from Escarpa or by some mounted antelope hunter.

"Well, it doesn't matter. Certainly I have no reason to think that I'm the only person who can ride this trail."

THOUGH the way steepened, she touched the sorrel frequently with her spurs. She would reach Escarpa by late afternoon and deliver the money to Kilpatrick. Tomorrow she would return home.

Again she stopped the sorrel, who was now willing enough to rest. She leaned forward and looked at the trail. To her experienced eyes the tracks indicated that the other rider had also stopped there. She looked

about. Yes, he had dismounted. There were marks of boots in the dry dust. Jane swung her horse in order that she might better study the tracks.

"Not high-heeled boots," she told herself silently. "And they don't look like drover's boots either."

There were several fragments of freshly broken rock near the trail. Who could have been breaking rock there? Of course it might have been Conrad Ellis. But no, to her knowledge the prospector had never owned a horse. He always plodded after his burros when traveling to and from Haileyville, where he bought his supplies.

Jane tried again to shake off her uneasiness. After all, it was sheer nonsense to fear a man who had stopped his horse and dismounted to break a lump of rock, then remounted and gone on.

She smiled a little as she began to wonder about the prospector.

"Well, if I'm going to meet him, at least I hope he is good-looking, and not too old."

Since the mysterious prospector seemed to be traveling toward Escarpa, perhaps she might meet him there. Touching the sorrel with a spur, she rode on into the pass. She was entering it when she stopped again. The fresh tracks of the shod horse were no longer in the trail.

Jane turned in her saddle to look about. There, just behind her, the hoofmarks left the trail and turned to the left as if the rider had suddenly decided to climb to the crest of the spur and follow it back to the main San Miguel range.

THE PASS itself was not more than two hundred yards long. It was steep-walled, with ragged cliffs fifty feet high. The bases of these cliffs were strewn with rubble and boulders and overgrown with tangled manzanita and thornbrush. A geologist would probably have told her that nature had formed the pass by settling the rock formations at the sides of an ancient fault-line.

Jane was not thinking of geologists, however, for as she rode on she felt her fears returning. She lifted her eyes to the cliff rim at the left, the direction in which the mysterious horseman had ridden. The rim was bare of human or equine life. It was as she had seen it many times before.

She was near the middle of the pass when the sorrel began to throw its head and whistle through its nares. Jane glanced again at the rim, but saw no man or horse there. As she looked back at the trail she noticed that the sorrel kept its ears pricked forward.

The explanation seemed easy now. For some reason the man on the horse had climbed the ridge to the west, then descended to the northerly end of the pass and returned to the trail. Jane found that she could smile.

"I'll overtake him and have company the rest of the way. He won't mind riding with a pretty girl."

Instinctively she replaced some strands of hair that had strayed from under her hat.

Her thoughts were so much on the mysterious rider who should not be far ahead that she only vaguely realized that she was having to force her horse ahead with sharp jabs of the blunt rowels. She was about midway of the pass when the animal snorted and braced back.

"Darn you!" Jane cried aloud. "What's the matter with you?"

She hit the horse hard with the spurs, swaying gracefully as it sprang forward. It made three leaps, then stopped so abruptly that the girl was flung against the high horn of the saddle. She uttered a quick gasp of pain, then forgot that the breath had been knocked out of her for an instant.

Not ten yards ahead of her a man was appearing from amid the brush and boulders. He had a gun in his left hand. His features were hidden behind a black mask. As he moved quickly into the open Jane shot a quick glance at his feet. He wore the usual cowboy boots so common on the rangeland. Even at a glance

she could tell they were not the same boots worn by the man who had dismounted back there to break a rock.

"Frank's hunch was right!" she breathed to herself. With a swing of reins and rowels she swung the horse as if she were after a tricky steer. Then she jerked the animal to a stop.

Before her stood another masked man, so much like the other one that she twisted in her saddle to make sure he was still there. No, there were two of them now. The man she had seen first was walking slowly toward her.

"Reckon you had best take it easy, miss," he advised, his voice garbled and frightening by its contact with the thick black mask. "It sort of looks like both gates of the corral was shut, don't it?"

CHAPTER III

THOUGH eager and incredulous because of the prospect of fortune, Conrad Ells was skeptical. How was Gosden to convince Jane Denny she should pay fifty thousand dollars for a prospect that was worthless?

"Just leave that to me," advised the range boss.

"But that'll be like robbin' her of that much money, Gosden."

Gosden smiled cunningly, and shrugged.

"And a lot we'll care for that, eh? She's got more money than she knows what to do with."

Ells' gross face became sober.

"Yeah, that's right. After all, I don't see any harm in takin' money that way. Trouble with this world is that the money ain't evenly divided. Look at her, and then look at you and me."

"Yeah, look at us two," Gosden agreed. "Here I am workin' hard and usin' my brains for seventy-five a month and board, and you're hard pressed to make grub."

"Grub!" Ells echoed in a voice that was filled with self-pity. "Say, I never made a decent livin', and I'm entitled to one!"

Gosden rose and stamped about. He stopped dramatically.

"Now look at me!" he ordered. "If it wasn't for me, what do you suppose that girl would do toward runnin' the Bar D Bar and makin' a go of it?"

"Yeah," Ells agreed, "what'd she do with it?"

"She'd lose it in five years," Gosden declared. "That's what she'd do with it. I tell you it takes a cowman to run a ranch like that. Yes, and that ain't all. I helped her father build up his fortune, too. I was with him for years."

"And he never made you any presents, like bonuses and such?" Ells asked.

Gosden laughed, then cursed.

"Presents!" he sneered. "I'd tell an Injun he didn't! 'Course he used to give me fifty or a hundred dollars at Christmas time."

By the time they had talked for half an hour they were convinced that taking fifty thousand dollars of Jane Denny's money would be no crime. Rather it would be an act of justice, a redistribution of unjustly held wealth.

"But how you goin' to do it?" Ells persisted. "We can't get it by you just goin' to her and tellin' her she's got to dig up fifty thousand and buy this here prospect, can we?"

With a shrug Gosden said he would not have any trouble in getting the money.

Ells growled. "I got a right to know how we're goin' to get it. It's my prospect we're goin' to sell."

Gosden's lips compressed and his eyes narrowed.

"Say, we ought to have a written agreement on this before we go any farther," he declared. "You got a paper? I got this stub of a pencil."

When Ells produced a small piece of wrapping paper they were puzzled as how to word the legal agreement.

"If the thing was a location notice I'd know how to write it out," grunted the prospector.

"Yeah, and if it was a bill-of-sale for some cattle I'd know how to make it," muttered Gosden. "Say, what's the matter with you givin' me a bill-of-sale for a half interest in the claim?"

Ells frowned, beetling his thick bleached brows.

THE PROSPECT had been worthless to him an hour before, but now it might well be a bonanza.

"But suppose you don't sell it to the girl?" he objected.

"Well, what if I don't?" Gosden snarled. "It ain't worth a damn anyway, and you won't be none the loser."

"But it might turn out good," Ells argued. "I ain't so sure about it. I ain't done much work on it."

"You just told me it was no good, didn't you?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. But it might turn out to be a big mine after all, and then I'd be givin' you half of it for nothin', Gosden."

The foreman's wide, thin-lipped mouth twisted.

"Oh, you ain't willin' to trust me, eh? Is that it?"

"No, no! 'Course I trust you, Gosden, but if you can't sell it to the girl for fifty thousand and it turns out good—"

"You wouldn't be any worse off than you are now," the range boss pointed out.

"If she don't buy it and it does turn out good, you'd be gettin' half of a good mine for nothin' al all!"

"But you said yourself it wasn't any good, damn it!"

Ells muttered that in its present state the prospect was all but worthless. However, it might turn out to be rich, extensive. Stranger things had been known to happen.

Gosden's right arm moved, became rigid, with a six-shooter in that hand. The prospector paled, flinched back.

"What's the matter, Gosden?"

"Are you goin' to turn over half of that prospect to me?" snarled Gosden.

"But—but are you dead sure you can sell it to the girl for fifty thousand?"

"I'll get the fifty thousand from the girl!" declared the Bar D Bar foreman. Neither his pale eyes nor the pistol wavered. "Don't you worry about that!"

ELLS was now past the first real shock of being covered by the weapon.

"But I tell you I want to know how you're goin' about gettin' the money from her," he argued. "Does she trust you enough to hand over that much money just because you ask her for it?"

"I won't ask her for it," Gosden said with a sneer.

Ells' eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Then how you goin' to get it? Say, did she send you over here today to make me this offer?"

"Her send me?" Gosden laughed. "Say, you bullhead, do I have to shoot you?"

A thick smile twisted Ells' lips.

"You won't shoot me, Gosden."

"The hell I won't! You just keep on with your bullheaded arguin', and we'll see!"

Again the prospector smiled, and shrugged.

"You won't shoot me."

"Yeah? Why won't I, Conrad?"

"Because if you do you won't stand to make twenty-five thousand dollars, that's why."

Gosden snarled angrily, then holstered his weapon.

"We oughtn't to quarrel, Conrad."

Ells growled that he had not quarreled. He was merely talking business. As owner of the prospect he had the right to know what was to be done with it.

"I told you what we was goin' to do with it!" Gosden exploded. "We're goin' to sell it to Jane Denny for fifty thousand dollars!"

"Yes, that's all good talk," muttered Ells sullenly, "but it don't mean money to me."

Gosden's hand moved toward the pistol, but he reconsidered. He craned forward.

"Say, is this prospect good?" he demanded.

"It's got a little rich ore," grunted the prospector.

"But is it good? Is that the reason you're welchin'?"

Ells admitted sourly that the prospect was no better than he had represented.

"All right!" Gosden laughed mirthlessly. "Then why don't you want to deed me half of it?"

"I'm willin' to give you half," growled the prospector. "All I want to know is how you're goin' to get the money from the girl. Will she dig it up when you tell her to?"

Gosden stamped about. When he stopped and faced the prospector his grisled, weathered face was twisted.

"She wouldn't give me five hundred to buy good cattle with!" he swore. "She's that swell-headed and fond of herself. That's one reason why you and me are goin' to take her down, Conrad."

"Then you are doin' this just for revenge of her?"

"In small part, yeah. But what I want is a chance to get a chunk of her money, Conrad! She's got too much of it. Look here, man! I'm givin' you a show to make a good stake."

WITH characteristic stubbornness Ells continued to refuse to sign a bill of sale. Again Gosden's hand touched his pistol.

"Oh, leave the gun out of this!" the prospector ordered. "You know you won't shoot, and I know it, too, Gosden."

"I ought to shoot you! You agree to one thing and then won't do it!"

"I don't agree to anything yet!" Ells growled. "This here is my mine, and—"

"Mine hell!" Gosden broke in. "By your own word it ain't even a good prospect."

"But it might turn out good," the prospector insisted doggedly.

Gosden's lids narrowed. His eyes became steely.

"Say, you'd sell it for five hundred dollars if I offered you that much, Ells!"

The prospector's coarse face puckered. Presently he shrugged and a smile came to his thick features.

"Yeah, I'd take that much for it right now, but—"

"But what? I'm gettin' plenty tired of tryin' to talk sense to you!"

"All I want to know is how you're goin' to convince the girl she should pay fifty thousand dollars for this claim," Ells reiterated. "That's the only thing I want to be sure of. That's a big chunk of money, and if she don't buy it maybe somebody else'll give me a few dollars for it and I could head for some other part of the country."

Gosden said there was a man who could convince Jane Denny she should pay what they meant to ask for the prospect.

"Yeah?" Ells grunted. "Who is he?"

"What does his name matter?" Gosden parried. "All that matters is that he'll make her do it, Conrad. I tell you she'll do anything he advises her to."

Ells smiled, and moved thick arms in agreement, but his face was still stubborn.

"That's all right maybe, but this here is business, and as owner of the claim I got the right to—"

"Oh, take your right and sell it!" Gosden snapped. He turned and strode angrily to his horse, which he led back to camp.

Sullen, furtive, yet with veiled hope in his eyes, Ells watched the

resaddling of the horse, the rebridling.

"Then we can't go ahead as things are?" Gosden demanded as he stood ready to mount.

"I told you, Gosden, all I want to know is who's goin' to convince the girl."

"All right!" the range boss snarled impatiently. "I'll tell you! It's Joe Hibbard!"

"Joe Hibbard?" the prospector muttered as if he had not heard correctly.

"Yes, Joe Hibbard! Ain't he good enough for you?"

"But—but Joe Hibbard!" stammered the prospector. "He's the richest man around here! He owns the bank! He has the biggest store in town, and lots of other property."

Gosden nodded grimly.

"Well, ain't he a good enough man for you, Conrad? Say, I happen to know that he advises the girl about everything. If he told her to invest a hundred dollars in a single rock, she'd do it!"

ELLS muttered, and wagged his big head until his long hair jounced on his shoulders. Again he tried to smile.

"But Joe Hibbard is an honest, respectable man," he mumbled. "He would not take part in robbin' a girl."

Gosden's laugh was derisive, confident.

"Say, Conrad, hell's full of honest men! Didn't you know that?"

"But is this Joe Hibbard—"

Gosden laughed again.

"Never mind about him. What I want to know is are you goin' to give me a bill-of-sale for half interest in that claim?"

"On the understandin' that I'm to get twenty-five thousand dollars?"

"Sure! Sure! Ain't we agreed on that?"

Again the gross features of the prospector puckered, then relaxed.

"Yeah, I'll sign it," he muttered. "If you think Joe Hibbard will advise that girl to pay fifty thousand for—"

"He'll advise her to after I get through with him!" Gosden promised. "Here, gimme that piece of paper."

CHAPTER IV

AFTER the first shock, Jane Denny's reaction was one of anger at having been trapped by her own foreman. She muttered his named through clenched teeth.

She swung her horse in order so that she could see both advancing masked men. Both were about of a size and build, and both wore cowboy garb. Neither wore boots that could have made tracks like those she had seen beside the trail.

"Keep your hand away from that gun, miss!" warned the man she had first seen.

"Yeah, unless you want to get hurt!" added the other. "What you got in that there saddle-bag?"

"What I have there is none of your business!" she flared. She grabbed her pistol, then jerked her hand away as two weapons were lifted menacingly.

"Girl, you want us to have to drill you?" one bandit cried out. "If you do, just make another grab for that pistol! You'd best get your hands up!"

"I won't!" Jane declared. "I won't lift my hands for anybody!"

"Tend to her!" barked the bandit who was toward the ranch. "Treat her plenty rough if she asks for it!"

Jane was very pale, but somehow she felt more rage than fear.

"Keep your hands off me!" she cried out as the man at the right approached. "I'll shoot you if—"

"Shoot and be damned!" he sneered.

Then her startled, angry eyes caught a glimpse of something hurtling downward through the air. She gasped as she heard a dull thud, then a terrified scream from the man at her left.

She twisted in her saddle, and her eyes widened with horror. The man was falling backward, and projecting from his breast were the handle and pole of a small prospector's pick. Through still dilating pupils she saw that the point of the pick was buried

to the eye. The falling man cursed as he dragged at the pick with both hands. He hit the ground and lay still, except for the twitching of a leg.

"Cover the other one, miss!" a voice from the rim yelled. "I haven't a gun!"

Jane lifted an amazed face. She saw a man standing on the rim fifty feet above and perhaps a hundred and fifty feet away. She wondered what he was doing there, where he had come from.

"Cover him!" he repeated. "I haven't a gun."

"Then it's sure your hard luck if you ain't!" roared the surviving bandit, and began to shoot.

JANE sat her saddle as if petrified until he had fired three times and the man on the rim had tumbled backward out of sight. Then she remembered her own weapon, and drew it quickly. She fired twice, and sucked in a breath of disappointment as she saw she had missed.

"Why, you damned—!" the bandit snarled, and half turned.

Jane's third shot roared a split second before the man could fire. His bullet kicked up dirt and pebbles under the belly of her horse. The sorrel leaped and snorted. Jane tried to draw him down and was about to fire again when she saw that the bandit had dropped his pistol. He grabbed his right arm, and Jane saw that blood was spurting between his fingers. She lifted her eyes. The rim was empty of life.

"Oh, they killed him!" Jane groaned, then thought of herself and the man she had wounded. She leaped from her horse, and held her pistol at the ready as she walked toward him.

"Don't you go for that gun of yours!" she ordered, and her white teeth shone.

"Go for that gun?" the wounded man whined. "Say, I'm bleedin' to death!"

"Well, you ought to bleed to death for trying to rob a woman! Back away from that gun! Back away from it!"

The man obeyed, but seemed fascinated by the red jets that spurted between his fingers. His mask had dropped, and his lean face, weathered and beard-stubbled, seemed to be made of a sickly greenish paste. He stopped when Jane ordered.

She picked up the heavy Colt he had dropped, and stuck the barrel of it back of her cartridge belt.

"I am going to make you help yourself! You got shot because you tried to rob me, and now you beg like a whipped cur for me to help you!" She jerked loose her green scarf she had worn loosely about her neck, and flung it toward him. "Tie that round your arm just above the elbow. Tie it tight!"

He grabbed the scarf and tried to put on the torniquet.

"I can't do it!" he whined.

"Use your teeth on that scarf. You can pull one end of it with your teeth!"

Jane saw the fear and panic leave his face while he strained with teeth and one hand to draw the knot of the scarf tighter and tighter.

"Pull it more!" she ordered. "That's it, pull it more!"

The blood that soaked the scarf caused the first fold of the knot to hold. With his left hand the wounded man flipped the second fold into it, and grabbed an end between his dirty teeth. With head thrust back he pulled until he could pull no more.

JANE was staring with horror at the man on the ground. She had never before seen anything like this, a dead man lying on the ground, with the handle and pole of a small pick sticking out of his breast. The short handle lay as if denoting the meridian line of his masked face from chin to hair, and the blunt pole pointed at the azure sky. The shirt, which had been dirty gray when she had first seen it, was fast crimsoning.

Look here, girl!" the wounded man cried, and there was a new note in his voice. "I think it's workin'! I think it's doin' the job!"

Jane turned and saw that only a

few drops of blood were falling from the man's fingers now. She refused to let him see the relief she felt.

"Well, I knew it would work," she told him as calmly as she could. "If you'd had any sense you would have thought of it yourself."

The wounded man tried to smile, and there was unmistakable admiration in his brown eyes.

"Say, you're hard-boiled, ain't you?"

"No, I'm not hard-boiled," Jane retorted, and wondered again what had become of the man of the rim. "I just wasn't going to let you two rob me, that's all. Where are your horses?'

Jerking his head, he indicated the direction in which she had just looked.

"Off there a piece, miss. We left them the other side of some tall brush."

She faced him furiously, hands clenched at her sides. "I want to know who told you I was coming through here with a lot of money!"

"We seen you comin', we—we got a hunch you'd have some dinero with you, Miss."

"That's a lie!" the girl protested. "You knew I would have money. Did Frank Gosden tell you?"

After a slight involuntary start, the man's eyes widened.

"Who's Frank Gosden?"

"You know good and well who he is!"

"No, I don't," the man denied. "Honest, I never heard of a man by that name before, Miss."

Jane informed him that Frank Gosden was her foreman on the Bar D Bar ranch.

He shook his head—"I never heard tell of Frank Gosden before. So you own a ranch, eh?"

"Of course I own a ranch. Everybody in this country knows that." Jane turned quickly. What was that she had heard?

The bandit, too, had heard a sound. He was the first to discover its cause.

"There's that—now!" he snarled. "I thought I'd got him with that last shot of mine!"

Jane saw the man on the horse coming through the pass. A tumult of emotions in her heart and brain made her so weak for a moment that she tottered to her own horse and grasped the saddle horn with both hands.

"Oh, he wasn't killed!" she gasped. "You didn't shoot him! He's the man who was up there on the rim!"

CHAPTER V

AS JANE DENNY stared at the strange man she saw that he was not dressed like a cowboy, though surely he was a man who knew how to sit a saddle. He came on at a trot, and he rode as if he were a part of the horse itself. He wore old, baggy corduroys, the bottoms of which were inside the tops of half-boots. His worn hunting coat hid his shirt, but there was a floppy Stetson on his head.

Jane had a feeling of unreality, for she had been very sure this man was dead, or at least seriously wounded.

As the stranger came nearer, she saw his rather squarish face, which was smooth-shaven and deeply tanned. His gray eyes regarded her almost humorously as he stopped his horse. He lifted a hand to the brim of his hat. Before he could speak she cried out:

"Look! Look at that!"

He turned his sober gaze to the dead man on the ground, then looked again at the pale girl.

"I had to take a chance," he told her. "The little pick was the only weapon I had when I saw what was happening down here."

"It—it was a lucky throw," Jane faltered.

"Plenty unlucky for him," the wounded bandit put in, looking toward his dead confederate.

As the newcomer's face hardened Jane noticed the set of his jaw, the steeliness of his eyes.

"Why did you try to rob this young lady?" he demanded of the bandit.

"Aw, I don't know," returned the bandit as he tried to laugh. "I reckon

we was just a couple of fools. Yeah, that's it."

"You were a couple of cowardly coyotes!" the stranger corrected. Then he turned back to the girl. 'I am Dick Jardine, Miss—"

"Oh, thank you!" Jane cried. "I am Jane Denny."

After he had dismounted she gave him her hand, and felt how small it seemed in his big one. She saw that he was a trifle above medium height, and heavy yet muscular of build.

"Did you get off your horse and break a rock down the trail yonder?" she asked after a moment, knowing the question was a little foolish and irrelevant. "It—it was a brown rock." She colored when she saw his smile and the ready twinkle of his eyes.

"It strikes me you are an observing person," he said. "Yes, it was a brown rock. It excited my curiosity, so I got off and broke it."

"Why?"

"I wanted to see what it was. I thought perhaps there might be some valuable mineral indications in it."

"Oh, then you are a prospector! But of course you are or you would not have had that little pick."

JARDINE stooped now. He did not withdraw the lethal pick, but turned it to remove the handle from directly over the dead man's face.

"Why—why do you leave it there?" Jane asked, and wanted to hide her eyes.

"I think it best not to pull it out," he said as he looked up at her. "The sheriff is likely to want to see it this way, or the way it was, rather."

"Aw, pull it out!" snarled the wounded bandit. "He's too dead to care!"

Jane whirled again.

"You keep still! When anybody wants you to talk you'll be asked to talk! Besides, you're just an ornery, low-down coyote!"

"Yeah, I reckon I am, Miss," the outlaw agreed, and hung his head.

Turning back, Jane saw that Jardine had lifted the mask from the face of the dead man. She stared down, then gasped:

"Why, it's Matt Maggart!"

"You know him?' Jardine queried.

"Know him?" Jane cried. "Of course I know him. I fired him a week ago from the Bar D Bar for—well, for general insubordination, Mr. Jardine. He rode for me for a year, and—" Instead of finishing the sentence, she whirled to face the wounded man.

"Did you know he was Matt Maggart? Did you?"

"That's what he told me his name was, Miss. I didn't ask him no questions about it."

There was racing through Jane Denny's mind the thought that Maggart had been a friend of Frank Gosden's. Several times she had asked the foreman to discharge Maggart, but he had always put it off, and she had finally found it necessary to do it herself. The whole thing seemed clear enough now. Gosden had told Maggart that she would be carrying money with her today. The foreman had actually wanted her to take the two thousand dollars to Escarpa, though he had made a pretense at objection.

"Then you do know Frank Gosden!" she accused the wounded man. "Of course you do! You lied to me a while ago."

"Me? Say, I tell you I don't know this Gosden hombre a-tall!"

"Oh, yes, you do!"

"I tell you I don't! I'm a newcomer to this here country, Miss!"

Jane tried to read the man's pale eyes, but there was so much pain and fright in them she could see nothing else.

"Well, you surely must have heard of Frank Gosden. If you hadn't, then how did you know I was to have the money with me today?"

CUNNING came ot the outlaw's eyes. His lips clamped. Jardine rose now and confronted him, then glanced at the indignant girl.

"What is the meaning of this, Miss Denny? Perhaps I can help you find

out what you want to know."

"What is the meaning of it?" she repeated. "Why Frank Gosden tried to put the double-cross on me! That's what's the matter."

"I still don't understand," Jardine said with a smile.

"Oh, of course you don't. Let me try to tell you. If I just wasn't so mad and excited!" She managed to explain briefly.

"I think I savvy now," said Jardine. "Will you let me do some talking now, Miss Denny?"

"Oh yes! Please do!"

Jardine took the pistol whose long barrel she had stuck back of her cartridge belt. He looked at it, then quickly thumbed three cartridges from the filled belt that was about the waist of the wounded man. Jane watched as he rammed empty shells from the forty-five and replaced them with the three cartridges.

"You've handled a six-shooter before," she cried.

Jardine grinned, and stuck the barrel of the fully loaded weapon inside the waistband of his corduroys. He faced the bandit.

"And now about this man Gosden," he demanded. "Did you know him, hombre?"

"No! I don't know Gosden!" the wounded man swore impatiently.

"As things are, you must have heard of Frank Gosden."

The bandit smiled craftily, shrugged, but winced from the pain the movement brought to his shoulder and forearm.

"That's different," he admitted. "Yeah, I heard of Gosden all right."

"Of course you did!" Jane cried. "Why else would you have known I was carrying all that money with me today?"

The bandit pointed with his left arm, indicating his dead partner.

"He mentioned Gosden to me," he stammered. "I ran acrost him in Escarpa a week ago and we—well, we sort of made friends with each other, savvy?"

"Birds of a feather!" Jane remarked contemptuously. "Then Matt Maggart told you I would be coming this way today with the money?"

Again the wounded man tried to look crafty. He pointed again with his good arm.

"Matt there, he suggests that we ride out this way today, as maybe we could pick up somethin'.'

"Maybe a few stray cattle?" prompted Jardine.

"No, it wasn't a few stray cattle!" Jane broke in. "Matt Maggart knew somehow that I was coming this way with this money, and—" Jane turned, ran to her horse. She reached into the saddle-bag. "Here is the money, Mr. Jardine. It's two thousand dollars I was taking to John Kilpatrick at Escarpa. I bought four thoroughbred Hereford bulls from him not long ago."

Jardine took the banded sheaf of banknotes, glanced at it, then dropped it into one of the baggy pockets of his worn hunting coat.

"If you don't mind, I'll take care of this for you, Miss Denny."

"Why—of course I don't mind," she agreed. Then she stared at the wounded man. She moved a little closer to him, peering.

"Why! You look a little like Frank Gosden!" she said. "Yes, you look a lot like him!"

THE BANDIT laughed shortly, sarcastically.

"Say, you sure must have this here Gosden hombre on the brain, Miss!"

"On the brain?" Jane cried. "I wish I had him in jail! But who—who are you?"

When the man did not answer, Jardine said:

"What's your name, paisano?"

"Aw, call me Bill Hurley."

"Then that's not your name, eh?"

"Of course it's not his name," Jane put in. "He wouldn't have taken up with Matt Maggart if he'd been an honest man. I had to fire Matt because he was slick-earing my cattle every time he got the chance."

Jane wondered why she felt calmer as soon as Dick Jardine laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Now let's get down to business," he suggested. "I suppose you still

want to take the money on to Mr. Kilpatrick?"

Jane considered.

"Oh, no. We can't do that now, Mr. Jardine. We've got to take this man in to jail. And there's Matt Maggart, and—"

"Maggart's a case for the coroner, eh?" Jardine prompted.

Jane paled, and looked at the ground. Then she lifted her face.

"Yes, Matt Maggart is a case for the coroner, Mr. Jardine. Will you help me?"

"I'm going to help you," said Dick Jardine.

CHAPTER VI

GOSDEN did not return to ranch headquarters. From Ells' camp he followed the horse trail down the creek until the stream bed became arid. He arrived in Haileyville just after sunset.

As he followed the dusty main street, there was nothing in the Bar D Bar foreman's manner to indicate the scheme in his brain. He was habitually taciturn and moderately reserved of speech. He reined to the side of the street when he saw Jim Anderson, the sheriff.

"Howdy, Jim."

"Howdy, Frank. Just ride in?"

Gosden said he had been on the southerly portion of the range and had decided to ride into town and spend the night.

"Fine thing to have a boss that isn't too strict," the silvery-haired sheriff remarked.

"Yeah, she's all right," Gosden replied and reined his horse toward the village livery stable.

Though he was ready for a hearty supper after he had put his horse away, he went first to the Antlers saloon, where he was hailed by Tom Danforth, its owner.

"Hello, Frank. Have a drink?"

Gosden rubbed dust from his face with a bandana and smiled slightly. He tok a drink and was about to leave when the saloonman said:

"Frank, do you know what's become of Matt Maggart? He left town owin' me a bill."

"How much of a bill?" Gosden growled.

Danforth took a day-book from under the bar and consulted it.

"Nine dollars and fifty cents."

Gosden seemed upon the point of offering to settle the bill; then he scowled and shrugged.

"I reckon you'll have to find Matt to get it. I don't know where he is."

"He's quit the Bar D Bar?"

"Yeah, he ain't ridin' for us any more."

A STOCKY cowboy with a puckered, humorous face ceased shooting Kelly pool and leaned upon his cue.

"Say, was you fellers talkin' about Matt Maggart?" he called.

"Yes, do you know where the son-of-a-gun is?" returned Danforth.

Shorty Colby took a few steps, then leaned again upon the cue. He looked yearningly at the whiskey bottle that had been left on the bar. The saloonman moved the bottle suggestively.

"Yeah, I don't care if I do," said Shorty. "Howdy, Frank."

"Howdy, Shorty," grunted Gosden. He stood taciturn and silent while Shorty drank, then wiped sunburned lips.

"Say, I know where Matt is," he offered. "You fellers want to know?"

"I'd like to know nine dollars and four bits worth," said Danforth.

"Well, it's this away," began Shorty wondering whether he could get another free drink, "I rides in from Escarpa about the middle of the afternoon, and—"

"Yes, I know all about that," the saloonman laughed. "And the first thing you did was to hit this place for a drink."

"Sure!" Shorty grinned and lifted his bleached blond eyebrows. "It was beer. I was awful dry, Tom."

"Well, what about Matt Maggart?" Gosden growled.

"Oh yeah, he was at Escarpa yesterday, told me he was goin' to work for the Briggs outfit north of that there place. You savvy where the

Briggs outfit is, Frank? You savvy their brand is a Box B?"

"Yeah," growled Gosden, "I know all about the Briggs outfit."

Shorty took a second drink without invitation. He grinned, and wiped his lips with the back of a hand. He squinted at the Bar D Bar foreman.

"Say, what'd Matt get fired for, Frank? Was it for rustlin' cows?"

"Oh, he just got discontented with his job," Gosden said with a shrug.

"Huh! And you up and fired him for gettin' that away? Say, I never had a job I wasn't discontented with, Frank, and I ain't never been fired yet. This here's mighty funny."

"Then laugh at it!' Gosden snarled, and turned toward the doors.

"Hey! Wait a minute!" yelled Shorty.

"Well?" Gosden prompted surlily.

"I just recollected I hadn't finished tellin' you about Matt Maggart," said Shorty. "There's a feller runnin' round with him at Escarpa that looks a heap like you, Gosden—yeah, a sort of strong resemblance that way."

Gosden smiled, then laughed shortly.

"Well, if he resembles me he sure don't look like much."

"Yeah, that's right! Anybody'd know that without bein' told, Frank. I heard his name was Bill Hurley, or somethin' like that."

Gosden pressed his lips together and shook his head.

"I don't know any Bill Hurley. Now if this foolishness is over I'm goin' to get me some supper."

"Huh? And ain't goin' to invite me to supper?" Shorty grinned.

Gosden strode to the doors, pushed them open with a sweep of his long, lean arms, and departed.

Shorty looked at Danforth, blinked, and grinned.

"He ain't hospiterable a-tall, is he, Tom?"

Danforth shrugged toward the pool table, smiling.

"Best go back to your game, Shorty. Pete's waitin' for you."

"Oh yeah," Shorty agreed. "I was shootin' Kelly, wasn't I?"

CHAPTER VII

THOUGH far from being physically tired, Jane Denny sat down wearily on a boulder and watched Dick Jardine. He was examining Hurley's wounded arm.

"I'll have to loosen this tourniquet," he said. "It's been on there long enough for one time."

"Don't!" Hurley cried out. "If you do I'll bleed to death."

"Don't you know what will happen if that tourniquet is allowed to stay there too long?"

"Yeah, it'll keep me from bleedin'!"

"It'll cut off all the circulation of blood in your arm," Jardine corrected. "Then your arm will have to come off above the elbow."

"And he won't have any trigger finger," Jane added.

Hurley's face blanched. A wild light came into his eyes.

"They wouldn't have to do that, would they? I'd as soon die!"

From the voluminous pockets of the hunting coat, Jardine took two clean handkerchiefs. With them he fashioned a bandage for the forearm. Hurley stared as his blood reddened the bandages.

"You're all right," said Jardine as he turned to the girl. "How far is it to your ranch, Miss Denny?"

Jane said the distance was more than twelve miles.

"And to Haileyville?" he asked.

"About twenty miles from here," she answered. "But all this will cause you a terrible lot of trouble."

He smiled at her pleasantly, yet a little crookedly.

"I think the law will want to know why I killed Matt Maggart," he said. "Besides, I was on my way to Haileyville."

"You were, really? Then—"

"Helping you take this man there will be no trouble at all to me."

Jane bit at her lip, saying she would like to go by way of the Bar D Bar headquarters.

"Will it be out of our way?"

"Oh yes, at least ten miles."

"Then I think we had best let the ranch go for the time being, Miss Denny—that is, unless you are willing for me to take this man in alone. The sheriff and coroner ought to be back here as soon as they can come."

"Yes, I see." Jane smiled and shrugged, but a cold glitter came to her eyes. "Well, I just wanted to go by the ranch to tell Frank Gosden what I think of him!"

"You can call Gosden later, can't you?"

"I can call him!"

Jane watched Jardine remove the saddle from his horse and reset it. She asked:

"Do all prospectors know how to handle horses as you do?"

"I'm not really a prospector," he explained. "I happen to be called a mining engineer. I don't know whether it's true or not."

"A mining engineer? But you broke a rock."

"Rocks always interest me," he smiled. "You see, knowing them is a part of my profession."

"Knowing horses, too?"

"Well, I happen to have been born and reared on a ranch."

"Oh, I see."

"Say hadn't you better put on that twister again?" Hurley groaned. "There's a lot of blood runnin'."

Jardine examined the wounded arm, and saw that it was not bleeding dangerously.

"Say, where is your horse?" he demanded.

HURLEY explained where the animals had been left. Jane sprang to her feet.

'I'll get them! You stay here and watch him."

The wounded man's face brightened as Jane rode away.

"Say," he suggested, "what about you and me makin' a deal?"

"Deal?"

"Yeah. You got her dinero, ain't you?"

Jardine smiled and nodded, touching his coat.

"Then what you say we split it and *vamos* in two directions?" suggested the wounded man. "I savvy why you kept that money, pardner."

"You do?"

"Sure I do!" Hurley laughed weakly. "If you hadn't intended to keep it, you'd have give it back to her."

"Well then, why should I give half of it to you?" Jardine demanded as an end of his mouth lifted.

"Huh? You don't know?"

"I certainly don't!"

Hurley asked Jardine to roll a cigarette for him.

"I've got some tailor-mades," said the mining engineer. He gave the prisoner a cigarette and lit the match. Hurley's pale eyes were cunning as he inhaled deeply.

"Say, suppose you was accused of killin' Matt Maggart in cold blood," he offered.

"Well, what would happen if I were?"

"It could cause you trouble, Jardine. Yeah, it might cause you to be sent to prison."

"Do you think so?"

"Sure! But you see, if you'll split that roll of greenbacks with me, and let me ride away when she comes with my bronc—"

"Then I wouldn't get into any trouble over killing your friend, eh?"

"Sure, that's the idea, pardner. You see if you was accused of murderin' Matt it would cause you a lot of trouble, and if you look at it my way—"

"Suppose I don't look at it your way, Hurley?"

"Then it can sure cause you trouble! Yeah, no matter how it comes out, it'd cost you real money, pardner. You don't look like you was any too prosperous. How about it?"

Jardine stood as if considering the proposition seriously. He smiled just a little.

"I'll keep the money."

"Yeah, sure, I seen right away you meant to keep it, Jardine!" the prisoner swore. Then he chuckled. "After what you done for the girl, she won't ask you for it."

"Maybe not." Jardine shrugged.

"Anyway, you and I can't talk business."

"Well, you'd best talk business with me!" Hurley threatened, and his face darkened. "You oughta see where you'll make money by splittin' that roll with me and lettin' me ride away. We can make it look like I escaped."

JARDINE stepped back, measuring the man with cold, steely eyes.

"Then try to escape," he advised. "If you want to get away bad enough, you shouldn't wait for a split of the money."

Hurley shrugged, and some of the meanness left his face.

"I ain't in any stew to get away," he snarled. "I just wanted to show you where we could make a good deal, and the girl be none the worse off. She's grass-bellied with money anyhow, from what I heard."

"I hadn't heard," said Jardine.

"Well, I did, and I got it straight!" Hurley chuckled. "And it won't hurt her none to lose that roll, and it'd hurt me to lose even a couple of pesos."

The prisoner was ordered to remain quiet.

"I'm going to put the tourniquet back," added Jardine. Hurley stood silent until the operation was finished.

"Then you still think you won't split that roll?" he demanded. "It'll sure be to your advantage if you split it. It'll be a cinch to make it look like I escaped regular. You see, I can grab one of those pistols and get my horse when she brings him back. Savvy?"

Jardine shifted back two steps.

"No, I don't savvy!"

"Naw? Then you'll be damned sorry you don't, hombre! Maybe you think my cards are all played in this game, eh?"

"I don't care much whether they are or not," Jardine retorted. 'I'm going to take you in to the sheriff."

"All right, take me in!" growled the prisoner. "You'll be plenty sorry."

Jane came now, leading the two saddled horses.

"Mr. Jardine, can't we take Matt Maggart in with us?" she asked doubtfully.

The engineer shook his head.

"I'd like to, Miss Denny, but a dead man is supposed to be left where he died until the officers of the law come to remove him."

"Yes, I know," Jane agreed a little impatiently, "but Sheriff Anderson is a friend of mine, and so is Coroner Bagley. They'll believe me, Mr. Jardine."

"Sure, do as the girl says," put in Hurley. "It'd be a shame to leave him there all day, Jardine."

The engineer pondered, looking first at Jane, then at the prisoner.

"It won't be regular," he said.

"Aw, what do we care about bein' regular?" demanded Hurley. "He's dead and that's all there is to it. We savvy how he died."

"I'm sure it will be all right," Jane argued. "Of course Matt was never much good, but because he once rode for me I hate to think of leaving him here. There are buzzards—" She shuddered, looking skyward.

"Very well," Jardine agreed reluctantly. "I'll rely upon your explaining satisfactorily to the officers, Miss Denny."

"I'll explain," Jane promised. "I do think it will be much more humane this way."

"Sure it will be," Hurley agreed. "It's the only decent thing to do, miss."

ON THE saddle of each of the led horses was a riata. Jane watched Jardine take one of the rawhide ropes and kneel beside the body. He passed the rope under the dead man's neck and brought it up and over the handle of the small pick, then passed the rope under the shoulders and took a half-hitch about the short pole of the pick.

"Oh, why don't you take it out?" Jane cried, with a shudder. "It looks horrible that way!"

Jardine turned and looked at her.

"I want the officers to see it just as it killed him, Miss Denny."

"I see," she whispered, and tried to smile.

"It will have to stay this way—" said Jardine—"that is, unless the coroner and the sheriff remove it."

"He's right, Miss," put in Hurley. "He's dead right accordin' to the law."

"No, I'm not right," he declared. "If I was right I'd leave the body right here for the officers."

"Oh, there won't be any trouble about that," Hurley assured him. "The girl'll explain all that. You'll explain everything to the sheriff, won't you, Miss?"

"Yes, I'll tell Sheriff Anderson about it," Jane agreed. "There won't be a bit of trouble about it, Mr. Jardine."

The engineer got the other riata, and stood for a moment regarding the dead Maggart and the horse he had ridden not so long ago.

"Come on, Hurley," he ordered. "Help me hoist him up with your left hand. I'll lash him to the saddle."

Jane slid quickly to the ground, but stood doubtful, as if suddenly appalled.

"Can I help?"

"No," Jardine ordered gently. "It has been bad enough for you already."

CHAPTER VIII

NOBODY had ever seen Shorty Colby actually drunk, though many had seen him exhilarated. He took just so much, and quit, and no argument or cajolery could force him to take more. When Pete MacBride asked him how about another drink, Shorty declared:

"No more tonight, Pete. I've got a date."

They played pool until about seven o'clock. Then Shorty announced that he was going to supper.

Mary Horton was waitress in the Elegant restaurant. She was plump and blonde, pretty in a winsome sort of way. Her blue eyes warmed as she saw Shorty Colby bow-leg it through the street doorway. Shorty grinned, taking off his Stetson.

"Why, hello," said Mary.

"Howdy!" returned Shorty. He stuck out his calloused hand. "Been kissed since I seen you last?"

"And not since you saw me before!" she flared, and blushed. "Shorty, you've been drinking again."

He grinned, measuring with thumb and forefinger.

"Just that much."

"That was too much," she told him disapprovingly.

He looked about and saw there was no one else in the restaurant. Then he sighed.

"You know, Mary, I got an awful good notion to quit entire. I'd sure do it if there was any—well, any—"

"Incentive, you mean?" Mary prompted. She had graduated from high school at El Paso.

"Yeah, that's it! I'd quit drinkin' if I had one of them there incentives, Mary."

"Isn't common sense incentive enough?"

He looked at her soberly, and shook his carroty head.

"Nope. I don't think so. You see common sense is just too common to have much effect on me. It's like this. I oughta be jolted or—"

"Or what?"

"Or have somebody put up a awful strong argument. What you got to eat?"

Mary recited the bill of fare.

"Oh, you pick it out. I want to see what sort of picker you are, Mary."

"I'd rather you gave the order yourself."

"Nope, I won't do it," he said stubbornly. "You got to do it. I tell you I want to see what sort of picker you are."

WHEN Mary laid the small table for two, Shorty paid no more attention than to surmise that she reasoned some other cowboy would probably come in. But when she returned presently with two dinners instead of one, he lifted his bleach eyebrows.

"My gosh! You are a good picker, Mary. How'd you know I was that hungry?"

To his bewilderment she dis-

tributed the food on both sides of the table. Shorty looked at her, then about the long, narrow room.

"I didn't ask no son of a gun to eat with me, Mary. Pete MacBride, he wanted to come, but I wouldn't let him."

"Coffee?" inquired Mary.

"Yeah, Java."

When she returned she brought two cups of coffee.

"Well, by gosh! How'd you know I like both my cups of Java fetched at once?" Shorty grinned. "Say, you sure are a mind-reader, Mary."

Shorty gasped when she sat down at the opposite side of the table.

"G-g-gosh, Mary! I never dreamed you'd shove your feet under the same table with me!"

"It's time for my supper," she smiled. "Do you mind if I eat with you?"

"Do I mind? Hell no! Excuse my swearin'!"

"I didn't hear it," she said, and turned pink.

Shorty had already had ideas about Mary. Now he thought she was very pretty when she blushed. Yeah, her blue eyes were wonderful! He became more discerning.

"Say, you must've stuck your head in the flour barrel," he accused her.

"I didn't! It's powder."

"Gunpowder? Why, all the gunpowder I ever seen was black."

Mary laughed. Shorty had thought before that she had a sweet, silvery laugh with no trace of a giggle in it. Now he was certain of this.

"Face powder," she told him.

"Oh! Then it won't explode if a match is touched to it? Say, watch out, Mary. Your face is almost red enough to set it off."

"I'm not blushing! You're such an idiot, Shorty!" Shorty lifted his eyebrows.

"Why don't you eat?" she prompted coolly.

"Why—yeah—I oughta eat," he agreed, but did not. "S—say, Mary —" he began.

She lowered the forkful of potato that she was lifting toward her rather wide and humorous mouth.

"Yes?"

"Aw hell!" Shorty blurted, and turned brick red. "I don't know how to say it! And to make it worse, I know what I want to say!'

Mary lifted her brows.

"What is it? Isn't the food right? If there is anything the matter—"

"Matter shucks!" Shorty exploded. "What do I know about the grub? I ain't tasted it yet!"

"But you said you were hungry."

MARY took the forkful of potato, chewed thoughtfully, then asked Shorty if he were suddenly sick.

"Yeah, durned sick!" he blurted, and turned red. "But not sudden!"

Mary was looking actually concerned.

"But what is it? You didn't mention it before, Shorty."

"Well, that ain't been because I ain't thought of it!" Shorty sighed, turning still redder.

"I want to marry you, Mary!"

"Marry me?" Mary gripped her fork very firmly, and did not smile. "No," said the romantic but matter-of-fact Mary, "I won't."

Shorty slumped back, bewildered, his hope fading as the color faded from his face. He ran stubby fingers through his tousled hair.

"Oh, shucks!" he groaned. "I knew all the time I was sick the wrong way!"

"No, you're not sick," corrected Mary; "you're not even sensible."

"Huh? If wantin' to be married to you ain't sensible, then what is?"

"Thank you, Shorty," she said, and turned pink again.

"Aw, gosh, Mary! You're awful pretty! And you're awful sweet, too!"

"Thank you, Shorty, but this is something serious."

"Bet your durned life it is! Do you think I'm foolin'?"

"I didn't think you were fooling, Shorty," she said, and he failed to see the wistfulness of her face.

"But, shucks, you don't like this here biscuit-shootin', do you, Mary?"

HER eyes flashed.

"But look at it this away," Shorty went on before she could

speak. "Just think how fine it would be if you could stick your feet under the table with me three times a day, Mary."

"I hate biscuit-shooting!" she declared, and he saw the momentary set of her lips.

"Fine! Then quit it and marry me!"

Shorty jerked his hand away when she placed hers upon it, then immediately put it back.

"Gosh, that was fine!" he stammered. "I didn't know a girl's hand could make me feel that away before!"

She drew her hand away now, though not very quickly.

"Then—then why don't you, Mary?" he demanded.

"Here's why I won't, Shorty. As you are, how could you support a wife and family? You make forty dollars a month, and work about half the time. You're good, Shorty. You're honest and kind."

"I never rustled nobody's cows," Shorty broke in hopefully. "Honest, I never did slick-ear a critter in all my life, Mary."

"Yes, I know that, Shorty. But manage to be serious. If you had some responsible job where there were opportunities—No, wait! It's not because I am selfish. We must look ahead."

"Us?" Shorty gasped, and grinned doubtfully.

Mary reddened, but she had to laugh, much as she wanted to impress him with her matter-of-factness.

"I never did know courtin' was such strange business."

"This isn't courtin," she corrected him. "This is merely talking business."

"Yeah, maybe it is, but if I'd been buyin' a cow I'd done it long ago."

"You're not buying a cow!"

"You got the purtiest neck, Mary!"

"Yes, I know," she answered. "And now if you will get some responsible job where there is an opportunity for advancement—"

He looked hopeful again, yet still bewildered.

"Such as wagon boss for some outfit?"

"Yes, if you get to be foreman for some good outfit I'll marry you, Shorty."

"You will?"

She nodded her blonde head.

"Yes."

THEN Shorty was unaware that his pained bewilderment had become such that he grimaced and pulled his own hair. Where could he get a job as ranch foreman? Where the hell could he get that?

Shorty's eyes sought hers to help him solve this puzzle. His eagerness was so great that he failed to see how tender were her eyes and smile.

"Gosh, Mary, if you'd kiss me, maybe it'd help me to—"

"I'll kiss you," she said, and leaned toward him.

Shorty lost no time in leaning to meet her.

"Gosh!" he sighed. "That's better'n I thought it would be!"

"It wasn't so bad, was it?" she laughed, and drew back, very pink of face. Her blush caused Shorty to suspect that they had been seen. He glanced about, to see the swarthy face of Mike, the Mexican cook, poked through the crack in the doorway leading to the kitchen. Shorty grabbed a biscuit that had grown cold, and threw it with all his might.

The biscuit shattered against the door jamb, and the swarthy face disappeared instantly.

"*Adios*, Mike," Shorty drawled. "Thanks for the help."

"What help?" Mary asked.

"Why, you got to marry me now," Shorty declared. "That greaser'll spread it all over town as how I been kissin' you, and I won't have my wife talked about that away, Mary."

"No!" she corrected. "That sort of talk won't hurt either of us, Shorty. You must get a responsible job and show me you'll stick to it."

"Aw, gosh!" he groaned, and slumped back. "Just when I figured that greaser'd done the trick for me, and—" He stopped, straightening to listen. "Say, there are horses comin' up the street from the north, Mary! I wonder who—"

Forgetting that he had come there to eat, partly forgetting Mary, he

hurried to the doorway. Mary clutched at his left arm and peered into the street where four horses and three riders were dimly visible.

"Why, it's Jane Denny!" she whispered. "It is, Shorty!"

"Yeah, I know it." Shorty was the one who was matter-of-fact now. "And that there's a dead man on the fourth horse, sweetheart."

CHAPTER IX

THE light from the restaurant showed the cavalcade to better advantage as it passed. Though Shorty Colby was anxious for an explanation, he was aware of the importance of what he beheld.

"What is it all about?" Mary whispered. "The man on the horse they are leading is hurt, Shorty. Look at his arm."

"Yeah," Shorty agreed, "but I don't know what it's all about. Looks like there's been a fight somewhere."

"But who's that man riding with Jane Denny? Is he an officer?"

Shorty said he did not know, but that he meant to find out as soon as he could.

"Come along, Mary?"

"Oh, I can't! There'll be nobody in here in case anybody comes in to eat."

"Let 'em wait!"

"No, I'll stay, Shorty!"

The sheriff's office was in a small plaza where the courthouse was situated. The sheriff's office occupied a corner of this plaza.

"Where's Jim Anderson, Mary?" Shorty asked as he started to leave.

"Why, I think he's at his office," Mary answered. "I saw him go that way a while ago. Yes. there's a light there now, Shorty."

"By golly, there is!"

Mary and Shorty were not the only ones to see the ominous and mysterious little procession. Men moved toward the sheriff's office, and numbered a dozen or more by the time Shorty arrived there. They were asking questions but receiving no answers from the man who stood beside his horse.

"Where's Jane Denny?" Shorty demanded.

"She went into the office," returned the man, who wore baggy corduroys and half-boots.

"What's the trouble, mister?"

"I think you'd better let the sheriff tell you about that."

"Sure, sure," Shorty agreed, and made for the office. He all but collided with Jane and the sheriff coming out.

"Why, Shorty Colby!" the girl cried. "Where did you come from?"

"Just happened to be here, Miss Denny," Shorty stammered. "I see you got some sort of trouble here."

"Yes," the weary girl answered, "trouble."

Shorty moved aside to let them pass, then followed toward the horses. Somebody cried out:—

"Say, look at this! There's a pick stickin' into this dead hombre! It's lashed in with a riata!"

"This is Dick Jardine, Sheriff Anderson," Jane said. The mining engineer and the sheriff shook hands.

"The man on the horse there is the one Miss Denny wanted jailed, Sheriff," Jardine explained.

AT ANDERSON'S order Hurley slid from his saddle.

"Somebody find Sam Bagley," advised the sheriff. "You come with me."

Hurley followed him toward the small lighted office. Jane and Dick Jardine went along, as well as Shorty and some of the others. As the stranger entered the radius of the light from the doorway, Shorty exclaimed:

"Say, he's the hombre I saw with Matt Maggart in Escarpa!"

"That's Matt Maggart on the horse there, Shorty," Jane whispered.

"No? The—" Shorty ejaculated. He wanted to fire a volley of questions, but remained silent, listening to Jane and Jardine as they answered the questions put by the sheriff.

"Say, look at that feller," muttered one of the men who filled the doorway. "He looks somethin' like Frank Gosden."

"Yeah, now you mention it, he does!" his neighbor agreed. "Mike, did you ever hear of a feller bein' killed by a prospector's pick before?"

"Never did."

A stocky man with black whiskers and black garb forced the little crowd to make way for him.

"You wanted me, Jim?" he demanded. "What's wanted of me?"

"Take charge of the man on the horse out there, Sam," Sheriff Anderson told the coroner.

"Who is he?"

"Matt Maggart." Anderson pointed. "This man killed him."

Jardine nodded as he met the coroner's startled eyes.

"Yes, yes! I'll take charge of the remains," Bagley said as he rushed out with coat tails flapping. "Here! Some of you men help me get the remains off that horse!"

The crowd had grown until the doorway no longer satisfied it. Men were peering in the windows, raising them to see better. Many were frontiersmen who had seen violent death, but none of them had ever heard such a story as that told by Jardine and Jane.

"It is true, Sheriff!" Jane declared when Anderson looked doubtful. "Mr Jardine was on top of the cliff and threw the pick. He didn't have a gun."

"Unfortunately," Jardine agreed.

The sheriff smiled a little.

"I don't know why you needed a gun, Jardine. You seem to have been plenty accurate with that pick."

Jardine said that he had had no thought of killing Maggart. He had only wanted to disable him when he had seen that robbery was being committed.

"That the pick hit him point foremost was an accident, Sheriff."

THE crowd jamming the doorway was told to move. Coroner Bagley and two other men staggered in and laid Maggart's body on the floor. There was utter silence as men stared at the pick and at the bloody riata that held it in place.

Shorty Colby suddenly remembered that he had forgotten Mary. He rushed across the street and down the other side to the Elegant restaurant, where he found her white-faced and frightened, and with no diners to wait upon.

"What happened, Shorty? What was it?"

He explained a little breathlessly.

"Durnedest thing I ever heard of, honey! I'd sure hate to have that hombre shoot me with his prospectin' pick!"

"A prospector? Is he a prospector, Shorty?"

"Well, no," Shorty qualified. "It seems like he's what they call a minin' engineer. That's what I heard Jane Denny tell the sheriff."

"But—but was Matt Maggart stealing Bar D Bar cattle, Shorty?"

"Hell no! Him and that other jasper was tryin' to rob Jane Denny! Aw, excuse me, honey, I didn't mean to swear before you."

Though stirred by excitement, Shorty did not forget that Mary had told him to get a good job. After she had refused to accompany him he hurried back to the sheriff's office. He was just in time to hear Anderson say:—

"Jane, it's lucky for you Frank Gosden is in town."

For a moment it seemed the girl had not heard. Then her lips set and her eyes flashed.

"Is Gosden here?" she demanded. "What's he doing in Haileyville?"

"I don't know what he's doin' here," said the elderly sheriff, "but he's here. Rode in late this afternoon."

"Sure he's here!" put in an onlooker. "I saw him a little while ago. He was playin' poker down at the Antlers."

Doctor Brill arrived now. He was young and pompous, pudgy of face and figure. He began to examine Hurley's wounded arm at once.

"Ah!" he ejaculated. "This man's life was doubtless saved by prompt and effective use of this improvised tourniquet."

"Mr Jardine attended to it," Jane said. "I want to see Frank Gosden."

* * *

MORT MORRISON, the undersheriff, bow-legged into the Antlers saloon and nodded to Tom Danforth. He dropped a hand upon

Gosden's shoulder. The Bar D Bar foreman turned from his poker game with three other men. He was surly of face as he growled:—

"What you want, Mort?"

"You're wanted at the sheriff's office, Frank."

"At the— Aw, tell'em to wait till tomorrow. I'm winnin'!"

The game was forgotten before Morrison had half explained. Gosden was pallid, incredulous.

"You say Matt Maggart's been killed?"

"He's sure dead," drawled the lanky undersheriff. "I dunno whether he was killed or died natural."

"And this wounded man?" demanded Gosden. "Who's he?"

"Answers to Bill Hurley."

Gosden compressed his thin lips. He shook his graying head.

"Hurley?" he muttered. Then his face brightened. "Say, ain't that the hombre Shorty Colby mentioned as bein' with Matt at Escarpa?"

"That's the name," agreed Danforth, who had come to where the players stood about the card table. "Don't you recollect Shorty said he looked like you, Frank?"

Gosden began to gather his winnings and put them in a pocket. He muttered:—

"You say Jane Denny is here, Mort?"

"She's there, and she wants to see you," returned Morrison.

The Antlers was immediately emptied except for its owner, who made ready to lock the doors.

"There's Gosden now!" a man cried from the pack about the sheriff's office. "Let him through. Miss Denny wants to see him!"

As the Bar D Bar foreman entered the little office, he barely looked at the pale girl. He stared at the wounded man, whose face, though weary and pained, was inscrutable.

"So you tried to rob a girl, eh?" Gosden sneered.

The prisoner shrugged a little, but did not answer.

"WHO are you?" Gosden demanded as he turned to the man who wore the baggy hunting coat.

"Dick Jardine."

"Jardine? Jardine?" Gosden muttered as if he thought he had heard the name before. He turned. "Did you want to see me, Jane?"

"Yes, I did want to see you!" she cried out, all signs of her weariness vanishing. "Frank, you may consider yourself discharged!"

Frightening, disturbing thoughts were already in Gosden's mind. Had Jane somehow learned of his sinister and cunning agreement with Conrad Ells? He started, smiled as if he had not understood.

"I'm fired? Why?"

"Never mind why just now. The Bar D Bar no longer needs you as foreman, Frank. I'll pay you tomorrow. Yes, I'll pay you tonight if you want your money."

"Shucks, I'm not in any hurry for my pay." Gosden laughed weakly, though he was trying hard to suppress his rage. "Likely you'll change your mind by tomorrow, Jane. It's not easy to get a good wagon boss."

"I'll not change my mind by omorrow," the girl said, and looked at Jardine.

"Won't you come along with me now and have some dinner, Miss Denny?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, and her weariness returned. "I must eat."

Respectful and incredulous, men made way for the two. As they reached the dark street, Jardine touched the girl's arm.

"You are very tired, aren't you? I marvel at the way you have stood up under all this."

"Yes, I am tired." Jane managed a little laugh. "And I'm ravenously hungry, too."

"No more than I. Where is the best restaurant?"

"We'll go to the Elegant. There's no best here, but Mary Horton will serve us well."

UNTIL then Shorty Colby had never realized that opportunity should be grabbed before it took to its heels. Twenty feet behind the couple he grinned and whispered:—

"Gee whizz! Hear that! She likes Mary."

He quickened his pace, calling:—

"Miss Denny!"

Jane stopped, uttering a little frightened exclamation. She turned, as did Jardine.

"Why, Shorty! You frightened me! I've had such a day of it."

"Best not annoy Miss Denny," put in Jardine. "She is very tired, and she's had quite a shock today, too."

"Yeah, I know all that," Shorty agreed, and took off his hat. "But it's a matter of business I want to speak to her about. It won't take but a minute."

"Matter of business?" Jane queried.

"Yeah, a matter of business," Shorty agreed heroically. This was not quite so hard as a proposal, at that. "As it is, you'll need a new range boss on the Bar D Bar, Miss Denny, and there's none better suited for the job than—"

"Than you, Shorty?"

"Why, yeah!" Shorty drawled and fumbled at his sombrero and felt weak in the knees. "I was the man I was goin' to recommend."

While Shorty's knees grew weaker, Jane did some quick thinking. She knew that Shorty Colby was honest and young and industrious, and that he certainly knew cattle.

"It's thisa way, Miss Denny," he said when he could stand the suspense no longer. "Mary, she says she'll marry me if I land me a good and responsible job!"

"Mary?"

"Yeah, Mary. You know. Mary, she's the girl as shoots biscuits in the Elegant. Mary's an awful nice, sensible girl, and she says—"

Shorty flinched as a small hand touched his arm in the darkness.

"You may have the job, Shorty," he heard Jane say. "I know Mary, and I like her."

"Oh, gosh! Thanks!" stammered Shorty.

Then he watched the couple as they went toward the rectangle of light that was the door and the two windows of the Elegant restaurant. When they had disappeared inside, he sat down in the dust in the middle of the street, but more from wild amazement than from weakness in the knees now.

Well, of all the luck!" he grinned. "Say, I got myself a wife! Gosh!"

He scrambled to his feet, scratched his carroty head, shook it, grinned again.

"Steady there now on the bit, oldtimer," he told himself. "This here's sure one time in your life when you want to get awful drunk, but you mustn't do it! Nope! Mary, she wouldn't like it."

CHAPTER X

THERE was nothing on Frank Gosden's surly face to show the rage he felt. He had planned to continue to work for Jane Denny while he robbed her. Now that he was no longer her range boss, his determination to perpetrate that robbery was doubled.

Men stared after Jane and Jardine had gone, stared because they thought Frank Gosden was as much a part of the Bar D Bar as the brand itself was.

"But what'd she fire you for, Gosden?" Sheriff Anderson asked.

Gosden shrugged. A small smile broke the surliness of his countenance.

"Damned if I know! Likely because she's a woman."

"But who'll run the outfit?" demanded an onlooker.

"Let her run it!" growled Gosden. "I'm through."

"Who's that hombre with her?" the deposed range boss inquired.

'Name's Jardine," said the sheriff. "He's a minin' engineer, he says."

"He says!" Gosden sneered.

"Have you any reason to think he ain't?" Coroner Bagley asked.

"I don't care what he is!" Gosden retorted. He cast an unsympathetic look at the dead man, then scowled at the prisoner.

"What you goin' to do with him, Jim?"

"I'll hold him in jail till charges are preferred against him," answered the sheriff.

"And then—"

"I suppose I'll have to keep him in jail until he's tried, Frank. That is, unless somebody goes his bail."

Gosden stared hard at the wounded man. The look the prisoner returned was as hard.

"Well, I'm not goin' to bail him out!" Gosden swore. Let him take his medicine!"

"Well, who's askin' you to bail me out?" the prisoner demanded. "But don't you worry, I'll get out!"

"Yeah, maybe you will," the former range boss sneered. He turned and sullenly made his way to the street.

"Losin' his job seems to have got under Frank's skin," Mort Morrison remarked.

"Oh, I don't know," Bagley disagreed. "He always looks mean and disappointed, but a good cattleman like him won't have any trouble finding another job."

"He'll find it hard to get another job like the one he's just lost," declared the undersheriff.

* * *

GOSDEN did not stop to mingle with the excited crowd. He went to the edge of the dark street, where he stood, hands deep in the side pockets of his overalls, left forearm touching the handle of the six-shooter he habitually wore.

"Of all the luck!" he muttered to himself. "Just when I figured there'd be no trouble puttin' that other thing through, this has to turn up!"

He went up the street until he was entirely alone so that he could not hear the many voices outside the sheriff's office. He stood for perhaps ten minutes, hard chin down, eyes slitted by the concentration of thought behind them.

Remaining there for a few minutes, he went on until he could see a large two-story house from which lights shone. He slanted across the dark street and took the gravelled path leading to the front of the big house.

"Do you think that man will make a reliable range boss?" Dick Jardine asked as he and Jane stepped into the light in front of the restaurant.

Jane looked at him and smiled wearily.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "I suppose he is as good as anybody else."

"Is he honest?" Jardine asked.

Jane stared, suddenly remembering that in the old hunting coat the man with her wore were two thousand dollars that belonged to her. She could not ask him for it. But he would give it back to her.

"Yes, Shorty is honest," she declared emphatically.

* * *

MARY HORTON stood well back in the room. She, too, felt her knees tremble. The proposal of marriage she had just received overshadowed for her the tragedy that had come to Haileyville. Mary smiled a little, telling herself that Shorty must have known she loved him.

"But I wonder how he found it out? Oh, if he can only get a good job!"

Mary had been more than a little in awe of Jane Denny because the owner of the Bar D Bar was so rich and pretty. Now she tried to calm herself as she saw Jane coming in with a strange man.

To Mary's surprise Jane smiled at her warmly, then came toward her, extending her hands. Mary took the hands timidly. As she felt their warm pressure she was puzzled by the peculiar smile on Jane Denny's face.

"You look so tired, Miss Denny!" Mary faltered. "You must have had a terrible ordeal."

"It could have been much worse," Jane said, and put an arm about the waitress' plump shoulders. "Mary, can you show me where I may wash off some of this dirt? I am so dusty I just can't eat this way."

"Why, of course, Miss Denny. It isn't much of a place, but if you'll come—"

"Wait a minute, Mary," Jane ordered. "This is Mr. Richard Jardine."

"How do you do," Mr. Jardine," Mary faltered.

"How do you do," returned Jardine.

Jane was escorted to a small room at the rear of the dining-room.

"Mary, I have a surprise for you," Jane said, and laughed softly.

"A—a surprise for me?" Mary stammered, and thought of a tip. Tips were very scarce in Haileyville.

"Yes, Mary. I have a great surprise for you. I am going to fix a nice little cottage for you at the Bar D Bar."

"A nice little cottage for me?" Mary stammered. She blinked and suddenly became very pink. "I—I'm afraid I don't understand, Miss Denny."

"Won't you call me Jane, honey?"

"If—if you wish."

"I wish very much, Mary."

Mary looked still more bewildered.

"But, Mary," Jane smiled, "wouldn't you like a nice, comfortable cottage at my ranch?"

"Yes, I would," Mary answered stiffly and politely, "but I still don't understand."

"Didn't you order Shorty Colby to get a good job, Mary?"

"Oh, yes, I did!" Mary cried out. "No, no! I didn't order him. I wouldn't order my—"

"Sweetheart to do anything," Jane supplied. "Well, Mary, I just hired Shorty as my wagon boss. Don't you understand?"

CHAPTER XI

THE FRONT door of the big house was opened by a man of medium size. He wore no coat, and his buttonless vest seemed to stamp him as a former cowboy. He was gray of hair, rugged of features. His blue eyes blinked in the poor light.

"Why, hello, Gosden," said Joseph R. Hibbard. "Come in. Come right in."

"Howdy, Hibbard," returned the ex-range boss. He glanced warily about as he went into a large, comfortable room with the other man. "Your wife at home, Joe?"

"She's out visiting," answered the richest man in Haileyville. "Did you want to see her, Frank?"

"No, I didn't want to see her; got some business to talk over with you."

"Can't it wait till tomorrow?" asked the banker.

"I figure we'd best talk it over now," he declared grimly.

"It's about the ranch?"

"It ain't about the Bar D Bar," grunted Gosden.

It was evident that Hibbard had not heard of the arrival of Jane and Jardine with the prisoner and the dead man. Gosden wondered whether he should tell about this, and decided that he should. Hibbard would learn about it later, and would wonder why he had not been told now. Gosden explained briefly.

"Well!" Hibbard said. "Did they hurt the girl?"

"They didn't hurt her," growled Gosden.

"But you should be more concerned about her, Frank," advised Hibbard. "You're her range boss."

"I used to be," Gosden corrected.

"Yeah?" the banker asked in surprise.

"Yeah. I got plenty tired of her swell-headedness. She thinks she savvies how to run a cow outfit."

"Maybe she does," said Hibbard with a small smile.

"Well, maybe she don't!"

"Yes, maybe she don't," Hibbard agreed. "Of course you know more about that than I do, though she often comes to me for advice."

Gosden's pale eyes regarded the other man coolly. There was a sneer of triumph on his lips.

"I want you to give her some more advice, Joe."

"But wait a minute!" Hibbard interrupted. "About this man you say saved Jane from being robbed. What did you say his name is?"

"Jardine. She said his name was Richard Jardine. You know him, Joe?"

"Never knew anybody by that name," declared Hibbard.

Gosden's grisled, surly features relaxed a little.

"WHAT you want me to advise Jane Denny about, Frank? Seems strange to me you want me to advise her, seeing as you've left the Bar D Bar." Hibbard smiled. "Or is it that you want me to advise her to beg you to come back?"

"Huh?" snarled Gosden. "Advise her to—"

"It struck me that way, Frank."

"If it comes to beggin', I can do my own. I come to tell you what to do."

Though Hibbard's brows lifted a little, he did not smile.

"I ain't a good man to be ordered about, Gosden."

"Maybe you ain't, Joe, but this is one time you're goin' to take my orders!"

An incredulous look came to his face when he was grimly told he was to advise Jane Denny to buy a worthless silver prospect. This expression slowly faded, and he became cautiously interested as he would have been in any business proposition.

"Where is this prospect, Gosden?"

The discharged foreman explained the location of Conrad Ells' silver claim.

"Well up Little Clear Creek, eh?"

"Yeah, not too far up," Gosden growled. "I'm goin' to show you I'm straight by tellin' you that claim ain't worth a damn."

"You're candid," said Hibbard, again with his small smile.

The men looked at each other. Gosden was surly, yet triumph shone in his pale eyes. Hibbard smiled again, and said:—

"I can't do this, Gosden. I have always given Jane Denny my best advice when she came to me for advice."

"Well, you'll advise her to do this whether it's good advice or not!" Gosden rose, and moved his hand toward pistol.

Hibbard rose, too.

"That gun of yours doesn't frighten me, Gosden. I have seen too many guns in my time."

"Yeah, you've seen too many guns in your time!" Gosden sneered. "That's where I hold the high card, Joe!"

"Then show your high card!" Hibbard ordered. "When a man deals with me, I expect him to put his cards on the table, face up."

Gosden laughed shortly and contemptuously.

"AND I suppose you always laid yours face up when you was dealin' with other men, eh?"

Hibbard pondered for a moment.

"I've done things I am ashamed of now," he admitted. "But I don't put a rope on your meaning, Frank."

"You will!"

Hibbard invited his grim visitor to sit down. Gosden said he would remain standing.

"Then come to the point!"

"I'm comin' to it pronto!" growled Gosden. "You recollect Bill Dinsmore down in the Guadaloupe?"

Hibbard nodded grimly.

"I remember Bill Dinsmore very well."

"You ought to." Again Gosden laughed contemptuously, b r i e f l y. "You stole enough of his cattle when you had that ranch in the Guadaloupe."

Hibbard's lips tightened and his eyes narrowed.

"I stole Bill Dinsmore's cattle?"

"You stole plenty of 'em; that's how you got your start, rustlin' his cattle. Then you come up here and acted honest."

The cold, penetrating look faded from the banker's eyes. His lips relaxed.

"How did you come to know about this, Gosden?"

"Oh, I know plenty about it," sneered Gosden. "You didn't figure that anybody knew about it, did you?"

"I wasn't aware of it," Hibbard confessed. "Go on."

"Oh, I'm goin' on! I'm just started. What you reckon this part of the country's goin' to think of fine old

Joe Hibbard when it finds out he got his start by stealin' his neighbors' cattle? Yeah, what are your wife and your growed-up children goin' to think about it, eh?"

"You have the proof of what you say, Frank?"

"Have I got the proof of it?" Gosden laughed. "Say, I've got five men who'll swear they helped you rustle more than a thousand head from Bill Dinsmore! Ain't that proof?"

HIBBARD paled, though he managed a smile. He spread his hands.

"I guess I'll have to do what you ask, Gosden," he said, and his voice was almost a groan. "I can't bear to think of the disgrace exposure would bring to my wife and children." He slumped into his chair.

After rolling a cigarette with nervous fingers, Gosden resumed his seat. There was a cold, contemptuous smile on his thin lips.

"I'll advise Jane Denny to buy the Ells claim," Hibbard mumbled.

"And she'll take your advice, eh?"

"I think she will. She has always taken my advice in the past, but fifty thousand dollars is a large sum, Gosden."

"She could throw that much away and never miss it!"

Hibbard managed a sort of smile.

"Yes, Jane is a rich woman," he admitted.

"When will you give her this advice, Joe? She's in town now."

Hibbard pointed out reasons why he could not offer this advice to Jane too abruptly. It would be almost certain to make her suspicious.

"Yeah, maybe it would," Gosden admitted. "But you'll get that money out of her, Joe Hibbard, or I'll tell this whole country what a cattle thief you were down in the Guadaloupe!"

"I'll get the money from her, I'll get the money from her," Hibbard mumbled. "But, man, we can't do this in a hurry. It involves too much money."

"Well, I ain't in a hell of a hurry," Gosden agreed warily. "All I want to be sure of is that we get the money."

"We?"

"Yeah, Ells and me! We're goin' to split the fifty thousand even."

A new sort of smile came to the banker's face. His eyes narrowed, twinkled.

"Just where do I come in, Gosden?"

"Huh? Where do you come in?"

"Yes. What share do I get out of this?" asked Hibbard.

"Here's where you come in!" Gosden sneered as he put flat hands upon his rigid knees. "You keep on livin' here rich and respectable!"

CHAPTER XII

DICK JARDINE turned as Jane approached. She did not look as tired as she had before.

"What wonders a woman can perform with a towel, a comb and a bar of soap," he said with a smile.

"And some water," Jane laughed.

He led the way to a table, and drew a chair out for her.

"Have you ordered?" he inquired as she sat down.

"Mary will bring us something good," Jane said. "I told her to use her own judgment. Is there anything special you'd like to have?"

"Do you think Mary has her wits about her enough to order for two hungry people," Jardine asked, "or is she too much in love?"

"Oh, I think she can bring us something," Jane replied, "even if she is happier tonight than she's ever been before."

Jardine regarded her steadily across the table for a long moment.

"I think you are an impulsive person, Jane Denny."

"Why?"

He smiled a little whimsically.

"Would you have hired Shorty if he hadn't confessed he had to get a job to get this girl?"

"No, I suppose not," Jane said. "But now I'm glad I did hire him, for Mary is so very happy. I'm going to

build them a little cottage at the ranch."

"You don't happen to have another cottage there, do you?" he inquired soberly.

Jane studied him, wondering whether he could have possibly read her thoughts. She tried to be matter-of-fact as she said:—

"I have a large house, and I shall expect you to be my guest there for a while, Mr. Jardine. I want to try to repay you for what you have done for me today."

"I shall have to disappoint you there," Jardine said. "I expect to remain here only for the night. I have an appointment in Demming three days from today."

"Oh! Must you go right on? I had hoped—"

Jane did not want him to go, but she resolved that he should not know this. She was wondering why he did not offer her back her two thousand dollars. It was not that she really wanted it back except to have him prove his honesty and thoughtfulness. She knew men who would walk miles to pay her a dollar if they owed it to her—Mr. Hibbard, for instance. She would trust Joe Hibbard with her last dollar.

"I'm afraid it would take something really important to keep me here for a day or two, Miss Denny."

JANE smiled, but felt like frowning. Did he think she was unimportant?

"I'm sorry you have to hurry so," she said.

"So am I."

Mary came now, pink and agitated, trying hard to appear calm.

"I brought you two sirloins with French fried potatoes," she said. "Will they do?"

"Excellent," agreed Jardine, smiling at her. "How did you know just what we wanted?" He reached a hand into the right side pocket of his baggy corduroys. "Would I be presumptuous if I offered you a present at this time, Mary? It is not likely that I shall be here when the nuptials occur."

"Nuptials?" Mary stammered. "Oh, I know! You mean when Shorty and I get married!"

Jardine placed five double-eagles at his right. Mary stared at the gold pieces, then looked at Jane.

"Should—should I take it?"

"If it will please Mr. Jardine," Jane said.

"Would it please you?" Mary asked him timidly.

"Very much," Jardine said with a warm smile as he pushed the coins toward her.

"But it's so much money, sir!"

Pride and vanity forbade her confessing that she worked for twenty dollars a month.

"Now—now I'll bring your coffee!" she cried out. "Oh, I'm so flustered I just don't know what I'm doing!"

What she wanted most of all to do was to show the money to Shorty Colby. In the kitchen, she glanced about hurriedly.

"Where is he, Mike?"

"Hah! He is so damn' excite he is go for get heem a bottle of wheesky!" replied the cook.

"No?" Mary gasped. "Oh, he wouldn't do that—now!"

"*Seguro!* He do jus' that!" Mike declared. "He is for tell me he is so damn' happy and excite he just have to go and get good and drunk!"

Just then Shorty framed himself in the doorway against the darkness.

"Where have you been?" Mary demanded.

SHORTY came in, looking puzzled, for there was no sweetness in Mary's blue eyes. He stammered that he had been to the sheriff's office.

"To the sheriff's office," Mary repeated. She walked close to him, but shied back when he tried to put a hand upon her arm. "Oh, Shorty, have you been for a bottle of whiskey?"

"Bottle?" Shorty ejaculated. "Who said I went for a bottle? I just wanted to see what had developed at the sheriff's office."

Mary turned flashing eyes upon the cook.

"Miguel Perez, you lied to me!"

"*Seguro,* I make the beeg lie!"

Mike admitted, and laughed heartily. "What lettle crime is she if I tell the beeg lie to the beeg fools who are much in love, no?"

Mary sniffed, stamped a foot at him, then turned to Shorty. She opened her hand.

"Look!"

"Gee whizz!" gasped Shorty. "Five twenties! Say, where'd you get 'em?"

"Mr. Jardine gave them to me."

"Mr. Jardine?" Shorty's face began to darken. "Say, I don't want men givin' money to my wife!"

"But I'm not your wife, Shorty," Mary cried; then tears came to her eyes. "And he gave them to me as a wedding present for us!"

"Well, if he made you a weddin' present—" Shorty said.

"Of course he did!" Mary declared. "Jane Denny saw him do it, and she told me to take it. Mr. Jardine is such a nice man, Shorty! I hope Jane marries him!"

Shorty's jaw dropped and his eyes widened.

"Say, girl," he grinned, "have you turned matchmaker already? What do you know about this Jardine man?"

"Well, he's awfully nice!" Mary contended. "I know Jane thinks so, too. Oh my goodness! I forgot to take them their coffee! I'll be back here in a minute, Shorty. And don't you go to the sheriff's office again. Understand that?"

"Sure, I savvy," Shorty agreed, and grinned.

As Mary fluttered out, Mike said soberly and with an eloquent shrug:

"Now you see what you have go and do, Shorty. Thees woman, she is for be your damn' boss all the rest of your life!"

"Huh! That's fine!' Shorty grinned. "That's just what I want her to be. She'll boss me, and I'm goin' to boss the Bar D Bar outfit. If that there ain't a fine set-up, I'd like to know what is! How about some coffee, Mike?"

The cook gestured toward the coffee pot.

"Help your damn' fool self, *Senor* Shorty."

"MARY," said Jane as the waitress set down the two cups of coffee, "do you know where Shorty is?"

"Oh no, I really don't!" Mary gasped, and turned guiltily pink because she could not confess that Shorty was in the kitchen. "He—he may be in the sheriff's office."

Jane smiled sweetly.

"Will you tell him I want to see him early tomorrow to talk over the ranch business with him, Mary?"

In the kitchen Mary fought for breath as she caught Shorty's hands and squeezed them hard.

"She wants to see you early tomorrow, honey!"

"Who wants to see me?"

"Jane does, of course. Jane Denny, I mean. Isn't it wonderful for you to be so important all of a sudden, Shorty?"

He had an arm about her waist now.

"It's importanter to have a girl like you, Mary."

"Hah, kees her!" Mike exploded. "Kees her good and hard, Shorty! Give her the *gran beso!* The *gran beso muy calor!*"

As Mary's face moved closer to the blunt-featured, sober one, she frowned, then smiled.

"Do you know what *calor* means, Shorty?"

"Sure, I savvy," said Shorty. "It means put plenty of heat into it."

* * *

Half an hour later Jane Denny and Dick Jardine approached the hotel. The engineer stopped, and Jane turned.

"Will you be good enough to engage a room for me, Miss Denny? There is a man here I must see tonight if I am to get away tomorrow. By the way, do you happen to know where a Mr. Hibbard lives?"

"Why, of course," said Mary. "I'll show you. He is just about the best friend I have in Haileyville, Mr. Jardine. Shall I go with you?"

"I shall go alone," Jardine told her somewhat stiffly.

Jane directed him, and climbed the stairs a few minutes later on legs that

felt very tired. She lit the lamp in the room she usually occupied when in Haileyville. She sat down on the bed and cupped her hands over her chin. She stared at the dingy carpet and was aware only that Richard Jardine had not even suggested offering to give back her two thousand dollars. And he was going on tomorrow!

"I wonder if Mr. Jardine could be a crook, too," she whispered. "So many men have tried to rob me since my father died!"

CHAPTER XIII

JOE HIBBARD did not sit long, but rose and went to his desk. A few minutes later he went out, without stopping for his hat. He turned into a dark side street and awoke Fred Miller, the telegraph operator.

"I can't send this for you tonight, Mr. Hibbard," Miller said sleepily.

"Then send it the first thing in the morning, Fred. Here's a dollar for costs and your trouble."

Hibbard walked slowly on the way home, thinking and expecting to meet his wife. This he did not do, and found when he reached home that she had not returned. He had had time to light a cigar when he heard a step on the porch and knew it was not hers. His face hardened.

"I wonder if that damned Gosden is back!" he muttered, and the bell rang.

He expected to see Gosden when he opened the door. Instead there stood a man wearing an old hunting coat and baggy corduroy trousers whose ends were tucked into worn half-boots.

"Good evening," said the banker stiffly.

"Are you Mr. Joseph Hibbard?" asked the visitor.

Without further formality Hibbard moved aside to let the stranger come in, with the thought that he must be associated with Gosden in some manner. The light in the living-room allowed him a better look at the tanned, strong face, the steady gray eyes.

"I'm Richard Jardine, sir."

"Yes?"

"My father—" began Jardine.

Hibbard's face was doubtful. Then it brightened.

"Great Scott, boy, are you the son of my old friend, Ben Jardine?"

"None other, sir. He asked me to call on you, since I had to pass through here on my way to Demming."

They shook hands warmly. Hibbard offered his guest a cigar which Jardine lit. Presently Hibbard said:

"And what are you doing, Dick? From the looks of those clothes you are not a cowboy like your father used to be."

Jardine explained that he was a mining engineer.

"Well, well!" laughed the banker, "It comes to me now that I've read of one Richard Jardine makin' quite a name for himself in that profession."

"Some people seem to make the mistake of thinking that, sir."

There was genuine kindliness and relief in Joe Hibbard's eyes. He and Jardine talked for half an hour, and the banker-merchant was pleased that his wife did not return.

"But you can't go on tomorrow, Dick."

"I must," Jardine declared. "I have agreed to be in Demming on a certain date."

"But there must be an inquest into Maggart's death," Hibbard pointed out. "You are one of the material witnesses, and the law will not let you go until the inquest is held. I doubt that French will agree to a postponement."

"Who is French?"

"The district attorney."

* * *

JANE DENNY awoke at sunrise, weary, and a little puzzled because of her strange surroundings. Gradually events of the previous day came back to her. She rose and dressed quickly, meanwhile wondering whether Jardine was waiting. She had promised him she would breakfast with him.

Although she dressed hurriedly, Jane did so with care, though she thought as much about her two thousand dollars as she did about Richard

Jardine. She scolded herself for thinking about the money and explained that in the excitement of the tragic events of the previous day he had not thought to return it.

When she reached the foot of the stairs she found the lobby empty except for Harry Bender, the owner of the hotel.

"Has Mr. Jardine been waiting for me, Harry?"

He told her Jardine had left before daylight. A lump rose in Jane's throat, but she forced a smile, as if she were not interested in Mr. Jardine anyway.

"Did he leave anything for me?" She strove to be casual as she asked this question.

Bender shook his head.

"Not a thing, Jane. Just left an order to be called at four a. m. He had breakfast down the street, and rode away."

"Toward Demming? He said he had to go to Demming."

"Didn't tell me anything about which way he was ridin', Jane," replied the hotelman.

The girl ate little breakfast, and barely tasted that. Her sadness and disappointment were not caused by the fact that it appeared she had lost the money, but by the thought of Jardine's dishonesty or thoughtlessness. Then a new explanation came to her.

"Perhaps he just didn't want to wake me so early," she murmured. "He could have left the money with Mr. Hibbard, and I'm sure that's what he did. But I'm sorry I didn't get to tell him goodbye."

JANE knew that the banker was an early riser. He would be at his store long before time for the bank to open.

As she entered the large general store, she saw Hibbard talking with a rancher.

"Why, hello, Jane," the banker said, and offered his hand. "I'm glad to see you, young lady. Heard you had a rough time of it yesterday."

Jane smiled ruefully, and glanced about in the small hope of seeing Jardine.

"It wasn't a good time," she confessed. "Did Mr. Jardine find you last night?"

"Yes, he found me," Hibbard said shortly. He moved toward his office, with Jane following.

"Did Mr. Jardine leave anything for me?" she asked as the door of the smaller room closed.

Hibbard smiled, and lifted his brows.

"Why, no. Did you expect him to leave something for you, Jane?"

Jane could not confess that Jardine had two thousand dollars of her money. After all, he had saved it yesterday at the risk of his own life. She forced a smile as she said:—

"It wasn't anything of importance, Mr. Hibbard. Did he go to Demming? He told me he had to be there in three days."

"Demming?" Hibbard pondered for a moment. "He didn't tell me which way he was ridin'. He said he had come by to see me to deliver a message. So he killed Matt Maggart with a prospectin' pick, eh?"

"Yes," she faltered, "he killed Matt with the little pick."

"Would you mind telling me about it, Jane?" the banker asked. "I have Jardine's story as he told it to me last night."

Jane was telling the story of the attempted robbery when Fred Miller came in and handed two envelopes to Hibbard. The banker glanced at them, laid one upon his desk, and ripped off the end of the other. He frowned as he read the telegram. Then he laid it upon the desk, face down.

"Is it bad news?" Jane asked.

"It could be worse," Hibbard answered. "Go ahead with your story, Jane. You say Jardine hurled the little pick from the top of the cliff?"

Jane finished the story, but it was less gruesome to her than it had been, for some of her attention was on the desk.

"Your other telegram, Mr. Hibbard," she reminded him. "Aren't you going to read it? Don't mind me."

"It's for Mr. Jardine," he explained. "It came in my care."

"For Mr. Jardine? But I *thought* he had gone."

"He has," Hibbard explained. "I suppose the wire came on the as-

sumption that it would reach him before he left here."

"But where has he gone?" Jane insisted, wanting to explain that Jardine had a large sum of her money, though she actually did not care a hang about the money. "Did he ride toward Demming, Mr. Hibbard?"

The banker pursed his lips.

"I DON'T think he rode toward Demming, Jane."

"But he told me he had to go to Demming, sir."

Hibbard's smile was a trifle impatient.

"Well, I'm sure he didn't."

"Where did he go, then?"

"I really don't know just where he is at present," said Hibbard as if he did not care.

Jane rose, feeling weak, angry and sick.

"Then I won't take any more of your time, Mr. Hibbard. I thought he might have left some message."

"He didn't leave any message for you, Jane."

She took reluctant hold of the door handle. She had a sudden feeling that she had been left alone, deserted.

"But he can't leave like this, Mr Hibbard!" she cried out. "He can't leave me like this! There will be an inquest, and he has to testify! What made him sneak away like this and leave me the only witness?"

Hibbard regarded her quizzically.

"Did he sneak away, Jane?"

"Well, it looks as if he did!" she said. "He left here at daylight. What made him go so early?"

"I don't know, Jane. Maybe he figured the appointment he had with somebody in Demming was more important than the inquest."

"Well, it wasn't!" she flared. "But you said you thought he hadn't ridden toward Demming, Mr. Hibbard."

He smiled at her, and shrugged.

"Jane, I really don't know where he is at present."

"Well, I wish I did!" she retorted, and was opening the door when he asked her to remain. He motioned toward the chair she had left. She sat down stiffly on its edge.

"Jane," he began. "I believe you have quite a large amount of cash. Am I right?"

"You should know," she laughed. "You have most of it on deposit in your bank, Mr. Hibbard."

"So I have," he agreed soberly, and hesitated. "Well, Jane, would you care to invest about fifty thousand dollars in something that looks very good?"

Jane welcomed the change of subject.

"I'd invest if you advised me to, Mr. Hibbard. What is it?"

He explained about the Conrad Ells prospect. Jane laughed.

"I don't know anything about mining, sir. Do you really believe it is good?"

HIBBARD was silent for a minute, apparently wrapped in deep study.

"Yes, I think it is good," he told her. "Very good. In fact, I suspect it will offer you a chance to double your money."

"But if it's that good why don't you buy it?"

"My money is all tied up at present, Jane. It would be hard rustling for me to raise even ten thousand cash unless I mortgaged. By the way, why did Frank Gosden quit you?"

Jane started, paling a little.

"Quit me? He didn't quit me, Mr. Hibbard; I fired him!"

"You fired him, Jane? Why, he told me he had quit."

Jane's chin lifted and there was fire in her blue-green eyes as she declared:—

"If he told you that he lied, Mr. Hibbard! There were a lot of men in the sheriff's office when I told him I didn't need him any longer. Sheriff Anderson himself will tell you I fired Frank. Yes, Mr. Jardine will tell you, too."

"But Jardine isn't here, Jane."

The fire melted from the girl's eyes.

"No, he isn't here. Well, Mr. Hibbard, if you advise me to invest in the Ells prospect, go ahead."

When she went out presently Jane had one immediate purpose in mind. That was to find Frank Gosden and reprimand him for having lied to the

town. Before she could find him, however, she encountered Shorty Colby.

"Was just lookin' for you, Miss Denny. Mary told me as how you wanted to see me this mornin'."

"Yes, I did want to talk with you, Shorty. I want you to leave for the ranch at once and take charge of things. I can't get away today."

The grin disappeared from Shorty's face, and in his eyes was the look of a faithful dog just scolded.

"But—but can't it wait till tomorrow, Miss Denny?" he begged. "I done promised Mary I'd stay in town with her tonight. She's quittin' the Elegant today, and we had a lot of things we wanted to talk about."

"And so you're going to let your love for Mary interfere with being my foreman, are you?" Jane demanded, though she smiled a little.

"Hell, no!" Shorty exploded. "But there's Mary! She's a awful nice girl, and—"

Jane was suddenly seeing Mary's pink, happy face, her misty, eager eyes. She touched Shorty's arm.

"Yes, Shorty, you may stay until tomorrow if Mary wants it, but I warn you, if you want to hold that job you must be at the Bar D Bar tomorrow! Now go and tell Mary you'll be with her tonight. Kiss her for me, Shorty."

Shorty grinned, squinting one eye.

"I'd like to kiss you for bein' so kind and considerin'."

Jane laughed.

"Let Mary be my proxy, Shorty. I'm sure, under present circumstances, she'd appreciate it more than I would."

CHAPTER XIV

JANE DENNY smiled wistfully at Shorty's back as he made for Elegant restaurant. She felt very lonely, and as if Dick Jardine had treated her very unjustly by riding away so quickly without explanation. Yesterday's events had made him a hero in her mind, and it was with painful bitterness that she strove to keep him on a pedestal.

Suddenly she began to search the street with indignant eyes, for she had remembered Frank Gosden. Her hatred for the former range boss was partly vanity because she felt dishonored that any employee would claim to have quit the Bar D Bar.

She went into the sheriff's office with the intention of asking Anderson to go to the Antlers saloon for Frank Gosden. That was where he usually hung out when he was in town.

"Howdy, Jane," the sheriff greeted her. "Yesterday was hard on you, wasn't it?"

"Not any harder than today," she replied. "I suppose I will have to testify at the inquest."

"Yes, you will. But, say, you look more like you were mad than worried."

"I am mad, Sheriff Anderson! I'm as mad as I can be!"

"You ain't mad at me, are you? Say, I'd hate to have a nice girl like you mad at me, Jane."

"Of course I'm not mad at you, Sheriff. But I want to find Frank Gosden. Do you know where he is?"

"You missed him by about an hour," said the sheriff.

"He's gone?"

"Yeah," declared Anderson. "He left here about an hour ago. He was in here and had a long talk with Hurley."

"Hurley?" Jane looked puzzled.

"The man you shot in the arm yesterday, Jane."

"Oh yes, I remember he said his name was Bill Hurley." Jane frowned. "But what did Frank Gosden want to talk to him about, Mr. Anderson?"

"I don't know, but soon after I come down to the office Gosden shows up and says he wants to have a talk with the prisoner I got in jail. I didn't see any harm, so I let him go back to the cell where Hurley is. They talked for about half an hour."

Jane compressed her lips, then tossed her head.

"Two of a kind!" she declared. "Yes, that's why Frank Gosden wanted to talk with that outlaw!"

It was the sheriff's turn to look puzzled.

"You don't think Frank Gosden is an outlaw, do you, Jane?"

SHE met the sheriff's look steadily.

"I'm not saying just now what I think of him, Mr. Anderson. I'd rather see him and tell him to his face. You heard me fire him last night, didn't you?"

"I sure did. And you didn't mince any words about it, either."

"And I'm not going to mince any words with him the next time I see him! He's been telling it around town that he quit! What do you think of that?"

"He quit all right," agreed Anderson, and smiled at the recollection of the vehemence with which Jane had discharged her foreman.

"Yes, he quit because he had to! And he'll stay quit!" Then Jane remembered that Gosden was only part of her worry this morning. She looked at the sheriff.

"There is one thing more I must ask you, Mr. Anderson. Shouldn't Mr. Jardine be here to testify at the inquest—that is, the inquest over Matt Maggart?"

"Sure he should be," declared Anderson. "Why, he's the main witness, because he killed Maggart."

"Well, he's gone, Sheriff."

"Gone? No! Where did he go, Jane?"

Breathless now, Jane told what she knew of Jardine's unexpected departure.

"Well now, this is mighty strange," Anderson muttered.

"It surely is!" Jane agreed.

Anderson hesitated. "It's stranger because of rumors that are goin' round, Jane."

"Rumors? What rumors, Sheriff?"

She paled when he told her about the rumors. They said that Matt Maggart had been murdered in cold blood.

"But he was not!" the girl cried out. "He was killed because he and that outlaw, Hurley, were trying to rob me. Sheriff Anderson! If Mr. Jardine killed Maggart while they were trying to rob me, he isn't guilty of murder, is he?"

"No," said Anderson, "that wouldn't make him guilty of murder. Any citizen has the right to interfere forcibly when he sees a felony being committed, Jane."

"I see," Jane whispered. Some of the fright and horror left her. "Oh, I wish I knew who had started such lies!"

"Yes, so do I, Jane, but on the other hand, it does look sort of funny Jardine skippin' town this way without leavin' any word."

"He didn't, Sheriff! I know he didn't, though he did leave early."

"It's sure mighty strange, just the same," Anderson muttered. "You say Jardine told—"

"He told Mr. Hibbard and Harry Bender he was going, but he didn't tell them where, Sheriff."

"Then I'll talk to Joe Hibbard about it first," said Anderson. "Maybe he can shed some light on this matter."

Jane went outside with the officer, but when he started toward Hibbard's store she called him back.

"But where did Frank Gosden go, Sheriff? Do you know where he is?"

He replied that Gosden had gone to the Bar D Bar.

"To my ranch?" she cried. "What did he go there for? Oh, I suppose he sent for his things."

She tried to smile in apology for her quick anger.

"Naturally he would want to go for his things."

GOSDEN did not go to the Bar D Bar alone. He took with him a buckboard and a driver from the livery stable. Arriving at the ranch headquarters at about eleven o'clock, he hastily gathered his effects and loaded them into the buckboard. He ordered the driver to return to Haileyville.

"Where you want me to leave this stuff, Frank?"

"Leave it at the hotel. Tell Harry Bender I'll be in some time tonight."

Leaving the ranch headquarters, Gosden rode southward. It was after three o'clock when he reached the small creek up which the trail led. He saw a fresh horse track leading up the trail.

"What the hell?" he muttered. "None of the Bar D Bar men would be ridin' in them two directions."

Rage and suspicion alternated in Gosden's mind as he put his horse to a trot. Had somebody found out about his and Ells' sinister agreement?

Gosden did not slacken pace until he was near Ells' camp. Then he rode slowly, hand close to pistol. As he leaned forward to peer round the last point, he gaped, then slowly hauled the horse back. In front of the tent were Ells and the man who had called himself Richard Jardine.

Gosden swore fiercely under his breath. "I wonder what he's doin' here."

He had seen a saddled horse, too, and there came to his angry and bewildered mind the thought that Jardine might be about to leave.

"If he does, he'll sure head this way!" Gosden muttered, and gripped the handle of the six-shooter. "If he does—"

Cold reason forced him to see that nothing could be gained by killing Jardine now, but cold reason could not quench the fire of hate that he felt for the man who had saved Jane Denny from being robbed yesterday, the man who had killed Matt Maggart.

GOSDEN had to decide quickly whether he should ride boldly to the camp to allay his suspicions and possibly satisfy his rage, or keep out of sight. He turned in the saddle. Back fifty yards a draw joined the main canyon from the north. A few minutes later he dismounted fifty yards from the creek, where the draw bent abruptly. Slanting along the side hill, Gosden came to a point from where he could see the tent. He crouched back of some rocks and bushes, peering.

About eighty yards away Jardine knelt beside an old packing box the prospector used for a chair. Near him Ells stood, heavy, stoical, phlegmatic. Gosden thought he saw a piece of paper in the box. He saw Jardine's right hand moving. Now and then Jardine lifted his head.

"I sure wish I could hear what them two is sayin'!" Gosden snarled silently. "Damn 'em, what's that hombre writin' out?"

Gosden chilled when he saw Jardine rise and Ells kneel beside the box. He saw the prospector take something from the hand of the man who had told Haileyville he was a mining engineer.

"He's makin' Ells sign a confession of what him and me planned to do!"

He crouched, fascinated, shivering as he watched Ells' right hand move.

"That Dutch is signin' it!" he growled. "That's what he's doin'! Minin' engineer—! That Jardine is some sort of detective!"

He saw the prospector rise clumsily, saw Jardine take the paper and look at it, saw Jardine fold the paper and put it into a pocket of his baggy hunting coat. Jardine offered his hand, which the prospector took.

"Yeah! And now they're shakin' hands on it!" Gosden snarled to himself

Unable to decide which of the men he should kill first, Gosden watched Jardine mount and ride toward the point.

The discharged foreman turned in his stiff crouch to watch the rider. He drew his six-shooter, cocked it, then angrily shoved it back into the holster.

"Range too long for this gun!" he muttered. "I might miss."

Crouching there on the rise, Gosden watched Ells as he stood before his tent, watched Jardine until he had disappeared round the bend.

"I'll wait a few minutes and then find out what Ells means!" he swore as he listened to the sound of Jardine's horse on the trail. "And if he's confessed, I'll kill him as sure as apples don't grow on sagebrush!"

By the time he could no longer hear the horse moving down the creek trail, Gosden had changed his mind. After all, Ells could be dealt with at any time. Jardine was the man who would have to be killed. Yes, he would have to be killed to discover whether he had a written confession.

Hurrying back to his horse, Gosden

mounted and rode down the draw, then turned eastward along the creek trail. Two hundred yards toward Haileyville he saw a horse and rider round a point.

Gosden drew his six-shooter, looking into the ends of the cylinder to make sure it was fully loaded.

"He didn't have any gun yesterday, and he may not have one today," Gosden chuckled savagely. "I'll ride slow till he gets out of the canyon. Then I'll ride him down and make this gun talk!"

CHAPTER XV

JANE wanted to go to her hotel room to think, but she knew there was business to attend to. She realized now how much Gosden had done, and the realization caused her to despise him the more. She thought of Shorty Colby. How would he make out as her range boss?

Jane was very serious of face as she turned into the Elegant restaurant. Mary started as she saw the face that had been so kind and sympathetic the night before.

"Why, good morning, Miss Denny," she stammered. "Have you had—"

"Yes, I've had breakfast," said Jane, and a small smile came to her eyes, for Mary's happiness was so great and so evident that it was infectious. "I ate at the hotel, Mary."

Jane asked for Shorty. Mary flushed, and seemed embarrassed.

"But I saw him come in here," Jane prompted.

Mary confessed that Shorty was in the kitchen.

"He's so impatient because I agreed not to quit till evening, Miss Denny!"

"I don't blame him for being impatient. You are very sweet, Mary."

Jane went back to the kitchen, where she found the grinning Shorty. She fought back a smile at sight of his radiant face.

"Shame on you, Shorty!" she chided him. "Staying here to keep Mary from doing her work!"

"It ain't so!" Shorty declared. "Every time she comes in here she wants me to kiss her."

"And I suppose you don't want to be kissed!"

"Hah!" broke in Mike, the cook. "Like the *muchacho* who has not ever been in luff before he is!"

"Aw, I have to accommodate the lady," protested Shorty. "It sure wouldn't do to disappoint her."

"Then you'll accommodate this lady," Jane declared.

Shorty looked owlish, then courageous. He took a forward step.

"All right, if you insist on it." He shot a look toward the dining-room. "But be pronto so she don't—"

"Oh, you fool!" Jane laughed. "I don't want to kiss you, and I don't want to be kissed. I want to talk business."

"Aw shucks!" Shorty groaned. "I'm always ready to accommodate a lady, ma'am."

"Then accommodate this lady by listening to what she has to say. Do you think you are going to make a good wagon boss?"

"Good? Say, I'm goin' to make the best durned wagon boss in the whole state!" Shorty grabbed a slab of pie, and began to eat it despite Mike's threatening knife. Mary came in.

"Why, what's the matter?" she cried.

"Aw, she's bossin' me," Shorty mumbled through much pie.

"My dear," said Jane, "if he doesn't take matters more seriously, I'm afraid that—"

MARY was suddenly very serious, and a little frightened.

"Shorty," she ordered, "you quit this foolishness right now and listen to her, or I'll—"

"No you won't," Shorty mumbled, all but choking on a hunk of pie. "All right, I'm ready for business. What is it, boss?"

"You quit being a fool, Shorty!" Mary commanded. "Or I'll—"

"No you won't!" Shorty disagreed. "When a feller makes a bargain with me, he's got to stick to it. What you want, Miss Jane?"

"I want you to take care of some business for the ranch, supplies and such."

"Sure!" Shorty declared. "I tell

you I'm already the best durned wagon boss in the state."

"You go on, Shorty!" Mary told him. "You go on with Jane and do what she wants!"

"Aw, sure." Shorty grinned at her. "Come on, boss."

Out in the dusty, hot street, Shorty wiped his face with a bandana.

"You reckon I got to put up with her bossin' me thata way all the rest of my life?" he groaned.

"Somebody's got to boss you, Shorty. I'm afraid you'll have to come down out of the clouds if you're going to make good at your work."

Shorty stopped and peered up at the tinny sky.

"There ain't a single cloud up there." He looked at Jane and wagged his ruddy head. "I couldn't stay up there without somethin' to set on anyhow."

Jane refused to smile.

"Shorty, what will Mary think of you if I have to fire you before you even start work for me?"

Shorty was instantly serious.

"You won't! Now let's get down to business. If there's one thing about me, it's hatin' foolishness when there's work to be done. Which way do we ride from here, boss?"

Jane hesitated. She herself was actually somewhat at a loss as to where to begin. To reach the store they had to pass the sheriff's office. Anderson, who was coming from the direction of the store, stopped when he saw them.

"Howdy, Sheriff Jim," Shorty saluted Anderson, Stetson on the back of his head.

"Howdy, Shorty," returned the sheriff, and looked at Jane. "Is it true you have hired this loco maverick to rod the Bar D Bar, girl?"

Jane nodded.

"Yes, Sheriff."

"Well, maybe you know what you're doin'," Anderson smiled. "But from the way he's acted since yesterday evenin'—"

"Gee whizz!" Shorty protested. "Can't a feller be happy once in a while?"

"He's *going to be married*," Jane explained.

"Goin' to be married?" queried the sheriff. "Who'd be fool enough to marry him?"

"Mary," smiled Jane.

"What? Mary, the biscuit-shooter? You don't say so!"

All indication of foolishness left Shorty's blunt face.

"DON'T you call her that, Jim Anderson!" he purred. "She's goin' to be my wife, and things like that just don't go!"

Anderson smiled and reached out a hand.

"I beg your pardon, Shorty. Mary's a fine girl, and—"

"Mary's a very fine girl!" Shorty agreed as he took the hand. He grinned. "I already discovered she's goin' to be awful bossy."

"You'll like it."

Shorty grimaced.

"Aw, I gotta like it. You see I made a bargain with Mary, and I never go back on a bargain, Sheriff. Yeah, and I made a bargain with Miss Jane here to be the best range boss in the whole durned state."

"That's quite a bargain, Shorty."

"Yeah, but it don't bother me," Shorty declared. "If there's one thing I know more about than women, it's cows."

The sheriff laughed. Jane looked at him and queried:—

"Did Mr. Hibbard tell you anything about—"

"Jardine?"

"Yes."

"There's no doubt he's gone, Jane," said Anderson. "Other than that I could learn nothing."

"But aren't you worried, Sheriff? You see—"

"Well, I would like to have him at the inquest," declared Anderson. "I won't be surprised if Dave French asks for a bench warrant for his arrest."

"His arrest?" Jane gasped. "But, Sheriff, why should they want to arrest him?"

"For refusing to stay and be a witness at the inquest," explained Anderson. "You see, he's skipped out."

Jane's chin lifted and her eyes flashed.

"He didn't skip out, Sheriff. He

must have had some good reason for going as he did."

"Yeah, likely he had some good reason all right," the sheriff agreed enigmatically.

JANE stared hard at him. Then the fire faded from her eyes. She stared at the sidewalk, and before her took shape the twisted form of a dead man with a pick projecting from his breast.

"Come on, Shorty," she faltered. "We must—"

"Get that business tended to?"

"Yes."

In the store, Jane tried to assume her most businesslike manner as she helped Shorty with the purchases for the ranch. She gave him numerous orders. Before she had finished Hibbard beckoned her. She went eagerly and with hope in heart and eyes.

"About that mining investment, Jane," he said. "I'll be able to give you definite advice tomorrow, possibly by tonight."

She smiled wearily.

"Very well, Mr. Hibbard. I'll do whatever you advise. You never have given me poor advice."

He replied that he trusted he never would give her any advice that was not good.

"But, Mr. Hibbard," she ventured, "have you heard anything more about Mr. Jardine?"

"Nothing more, Jane." Hibbard shook his head. "All I know is that he told me last night he would leave town early. I don't know when he'll be back."

"Then he will be back?"

"I can't promise that, Jane. I think you know as much about Dick Jardine as I do."

"Well, that isn't much, Mr. Hibbard."

In her hotel room, Jane sat down on the bed and stared blankly at the faded carpet. When she tried to think of different things, one thought crowded them out. It was that Jardine had gone, and that he had taken with him her two thousand dollars.

"Oh, why do I think so much about that money?" she asked herself impatiently. "If some rancher needed it to help him over a bad season, I'd let him have it and never worry a minute over it. But now—"

Presently she jumped to her feet and went to the window.

"If I'm going to think all day about Mr. Jardine and that money, I won't be worth a thing! I know what I'll do. I'll go to the lumber yard and order the material to build a cottage for Shorty and Mary at the ranch."

WHEN she reached the street, she met Dave French in front of the hotel. The district attorney was a short, square-jawed man with piercing black eyes. He extended a folded document.

"Good morning, Miss Denny. I was looking for you. Here's a subpoena ordering you to appear at the inquest into the cause of Matt Maggart's death. Tomorrow evening at eight."

She took the document absently.

"But tomorrow evening?" she protested. "I have to go to the ranch tomorrow, Dave!"

"You'll have to be on hand tomorrow evening," he said without compromise. "By the way, do you know where that man, Jardine, is?"

"I don't know where he is. All I know is—"

French regarded her suspiciously.

"What?"

"That Harry Bender and Mr. Hibbard told me he left about daylight."

"What? You mean he's skipped town?"

Jane's chin lifted and her color fled. She shrugged.

"I don't know where he is, Dave. You'll have to find him."

As the district attorney looked at her, she saw the muscles of his squarish jaw tighten.

"Find him?" he exploded. "I'll find him, if I have to get out a bench warrant for his arrest!"

"Then get it if you think it is necessary," Jane agreed. "I have to go to the lumber yard on some business."

French turned to watch her as she hurried away. He shook his sleek black head.

"There's something mighty funny about this," he muttered, "but I'll get to the bottom of it."

CHAPTER XVI

SUSPICION and fear that he was going to be cheated out of more money than he could earn during the remainder of his life by working for wages put into Gosden's brain an insane clamor for murder. He swore as he reached the point round which he had seen the rider disappear.

Instead of holding his pace, Jardine had accelerated it. He was perhaps four hundred yards ahead now, and had his horse at a trot. Gosden curbed his mad impatience until he saw him disappear where the trail bent. Then he spurred his horse cruelly and galloped on, regardless of danger. As he came to the second point round which Jardine had vanished from sight, he saw with savage pleasure that the other rider had not gained further.

Back of Gosden the sun was low above the mountains. Ahead, the canyon of the small creek had changed to low benches at the sides. Jardine, still with his horse at a trot, was following the trail that led eastward at the southerly side of the stream.

With his lips an ugly, tight line, Gosden mused that he could call and stop the other man. No, he would not do this. He would ride him down, overhaul him if there was to be a race.

"Maybe the damned meddler will run when he sees a man is after him!" he swore.

This time, using the spurs cruelly, Gosden was not satisfied with a fast gallop. He forced his mount to a run, and drew his six-shooter. Accustomed to chasing wild cattle down and along mountainsides, he rode recklessly, more reckless now because he was certain of surprising Jardine before he could ride out of range or turn to fight.

The bay horse, still being spurred, had raced for a hundred yards when it faltered and stumbled. Gosden, lurching forward, heard the clatter of a rock as it spun toward the creek. He jerked angrily on the reins, hauling the bay to its feet, then grabbed a groin, groaning. He had been thrown against the tall horn of his saddle. For a minute he forgot murder, forgot greed. At the end of this interval of pain he was possessed of a sudden cunning thought.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Wait a minute, man! I'm hurt! I'm hurt!"

Ahead, Jardine stopped his horse and turned it across the trail. He drew down his hat to shield his eyes from the glare of the low sun.

"What do you want?"

"I want you to help me!" Gosden shouted back. "I'm bad hurt! Horse stumbled and pitched me against the horn."

"You don't look very bad hurt, Gosden."

"But I am hurt," the former range boss of the Bar D Bar yelled. "I'm awful bad hurt in the left groin!"

"And it's your horse's left foreleg, too," Jardine called, with what seemed a note of derision. "*Adios!*" As if he had neither heard nor seen an injured man or an injured horse, he turned his horse back into the trail and trotted away.

"Why, the ornery—!" Gosden muttered, more self-pity than murder in his mind now. "He won't come back and help!"

Then as his murderous impulse surged back and overwhelmed the self-pity, Gosden drew the gun which he had holstered. He fired as fast as he could pull the trigger. A moment after the sixth shot had roared, the man ahead turned in his saddle as if he had not heard the whine of glancing lead.

"That's fine!" he yelled. "Try it again! Maybe you'll do better next time!"

Gosden dismounted painfully, sat down on the bank and pressed his groin. He knew that it was not seriously hurt. He looked for the man he had tried to murder, and cursed blasphemously when he could not see him.

As he rose and began to examine his horse, his determination to kill was as strong as ever. He jerked the limping animal back to the trail, cursing it.

"You're not hurt! No matter if you are, you've got to pack me to Haileyville!"

IT WAS just past dark when Dick Jardine rode into the village. He did not enter directly, but chose a route that brought him to the rear of Hibbard's general store. He dismounted, and took a small canvas bag of rocks that had been tied to the saddle. He dropped the reins over the saddle horn and slapped the horse upon the rump. The animal trotted toward the livery stable from which it had been taken early that morning. He had left his own horse there to rest.

Customers often used the rear of the store, so no attention was paid to Jardine as he walked in. He stopped in the shadow and watched until he could catch Hibbard's eye.

"Why, hello, Dick!" exlaimed the merchant as he came toward Jardine. "When did you get back?"

"Just now."

Hibbard led the way into his office and closed the door. Jardine laid the sack on the desk.

"What did you find, young man?"

"Suppose we let that wait for a few minutes," Jardine suggested.

"Why, of course. I might have remembered you would be hungry. Tired, too."

"Yes," Jardine admitted, and smiled. "But that's not what I want. Have you got a six-shooter, sir?"

Hibbard's eyes narrowed.

"What do you want a six-shooter for?"

"I suspect I may need it," said Jardine. "If you don't mind, bring me a forty-four Colt."

"And some cartridges, too?"

Hibbard returned presently with a revolver and a box of cartridges. He watched Jardine work the action of the new weapon, load it. The younger man put a few cartridges into a pants pocket, then shoved the box toward the banker.

"I shan't need any more."

"But tell me about this, Dick!"

Jardine poked the barrel of the six-shooter inside his belt and pulled the skirt of his baggy coat over it. He explained briefly. Hibbard's lips compressed, then relaxed.

"Are you sure this man is Gosden?"

"Dead sure, Mr Hibbard."

Again the banker's lips pressed together hard; again they relaxed.

"No use telling you Gosden is a mean character, Dick. You seem to know it."

"I know it."

"Now tell me what else you saw," Hibbard said. "Right now I'm interested in that."

They talked for half an hour longer. Occasionally the banker's face broke into a smile.

"Shall I take care of these specimens, Dick?"

"I wish you would."

JARDINE rose, announcing that he was going to get supper. Hibbard rose, too.

"Gosden may be in town," he pointed out. "Don't forget that he is a dangerous man. He will be more dangerous now than he ever was before."

Dick Jardine smiled as if not displeased with this warning.

"I'll keep an eye peeled for him. I doubt that he's had time to get to town. From what I saw, his horse was lamed, and I rode fast."

A they left the office and turned toward the front of the store, there was Jane Denny, coming in. She stopped as if she had seen a ghost, and bit at her lip to keep from crying out that she was glad to see Jardine.

"Good evening, Jane," said Hibbard.

"Good evening," she answered. "Good evening, Mr Jardine."

Her dignity, the frostiness of her pretty face were not lost upon the banker and the mining engineer.

"Good evening, Miss Denny," smiled Jardine. "I trust you have not had too trying a day."

"I managed to get through it," Jane retorted.

"That's fine," said Jardine. "Say, I'm very hungry. What do you say we walk across and have dinner with Mary?"

"Mary quit at six."

Jardine looked puzzled for a moment.

"Oh yes, I remember. She's going to marry Shorty Colby. Then what do you say we go to the hotel for

supper? I would miss Mary at the Elegant."

"Thank you," Jane tried to keep her smile from being very sweet; "I have had supper, Mr Jardine. I want to talk with Mr Hibbard."

She and the banker watched the engineer as he walked briskly to the front doorway. They saw him stop upon the broad porch and glance to right and left with right hand crooked as if ready for instant movement.

"What—what is he standing that way for?" Jane whispered. "He looks as if he expects trouble, Mr Hibbard."

"I don't think so, Jane. Why should he expect trouble?"

JARDINE jumped from the porch and disappeared. Jane drew in a deeper, freer breath.

"Mr Hibbard, why did he come back?" she said. "You told me—"

The banker smiled and shrugged.

"Yes, he said he was going away at daylight this morning."

"I know that, but what made him change his mind?"

Again Hibbard smiled as if he were as much puzzled as she.

"Jane, all I know is what he told me."

"Then what did he tell you, Mr Hibbard?"

"He said he had ridden about twenty miles when he remembered he would be needed here as a witness at the inquest into Matt Maggart's death."

"I see," Jane accepted his explanation. "But did he leave anything for me, Mr Hibbard?"

He shook his head.

"Not a thing, Jane. Do you want me to go after him and ask whether he has forgotten something for you?"

Gasping, she clutched his arm.

"Oh no! Don't do that, Mr Hibbard!" She moved back, managed a smile. "After all, it's nothing of consequence. It's no wonder he has overlooked it. If he doesn't think of it it will make no difference, so please don't trouble him."

"Mountain out of a molehill, Jane?"

Jane laughed a little shakily.

"Yes, that's it, I guess. I'm always doing things like that." She turned toward the broad doorway.

"But I thought you wanted to talk with me," Hibbard said.

"Well, it wasn't important," she replied with another little laugh. "I'll see you tomorrow."

CHAPTER XVII

THOUGH he yearned for whiskey, Gosden did not ride into the main street and dismount before a saloon. He rode to the corral back of the livery stable and unsaddled his horse. He went into the stable with the saddle slung over his shoulder, bridle and spurs in hand.

"Hey, what's wrong?" asked Ike Patton, who was looking after the stable. "Where's your bronc, Frank?"

Gosden explained that his horse had gone lame. He had left it in the corral where the ground was soft.

"Fork him some hay, will you, Ike?"

"Sure, sure, do it right now."

As Gosden went to the street it was with a tense, bent-knee walk. His slitted eyes were vigilant, his right hand close to his six-shooter. He would go up to the Antlers saloon now and get a drink or two. Then he would have supper. But if he encountered Jardine on the way he would provoke a fight and kill him.

He was passing the hotel when he saw Jardine talking with Joe Hibbard in the lobby. Gosden stopped, tensed, became more grim and suspicious. He told himself profanely that Hibbard had sent Jardine to talk with Conrad Ells.

"So that's the way she stacks up!" he sneered silently. "I might have known old Hibbard would try to put on the double-cross!"

Jane Denny, coming down the stairs, stopped. She wondered whether she should turn back. Then she saw Gosden.

"There he is now! I'll ask him whether he quit or I fired him!" She was ready to descend the remaining step when she saw the tense, snarling expression on Gosden's face. She

stood for a few seconds, small shoe pointed toward the next step. She drew it back.

Gosden was moving into the lobby with a peculiar, catlike quickness. Jane started to cry out, she did not know what. She saw Gosden's crooked right arm, the clawlike rigidity of the fingers of that hand.

She had only a side view of Dick Jardine's face. His face was freshly shaven now, but he still wore the old hunting coat and the baggy pants and half-boots. Jane wondered whether these were the only clothes he owned.

THOUGH she did not know of any reason for bad blood between Gosden on one side and Jardine and Mr Hibbard on the other, she was certain now of the ex-foreman's malevolent, possibly sinister intentions as he approached the two. She was about to cry out a warning when Jardine turned as if he had seen Gosden from the start. The men eyed each other. Hibbard turned also.

"Why, hello, Frank," he said. "Didn't know you had come back."

"You keep out of this, Hibbard!"

On the stairs Jane stood still, clutching the bannister. She was very pale now, and her teeth shone through parted lips. Once she had seen two men settle some fancied grievance with six-shooters, and she recognized the signs of coming combat now.

"Then go ahead and talk!" ordered Jardine.

Jane wondered why he did not seem excited or angry. The few other men in the room shifted positions quickly to be out of the way. One darted past Gosden into the street.

Instead of answering, the ex-foreman's right hand swept upward, grabbing the pistol. When he had its long barrel half clear of the holsters, he seemed to freeze.

Jardine's hand had swept to the left and disappeared under the flap of the old coat. It had flashed out with a six-shooter in it.

Jane ran down the remaining steps and stopped, her hand pressed against the squarish newel post.

"Well, what have you to say to me?" Jardine asked as he held his gun at his hip. "Is it to be talk with pistols, Gosden?"

Gripping the handle of his weapon, Gosden stared. His eyes were slitted, his mouth ugly. Then he whirled and stamped out to the street. He was out of sight in ten seconds.

Jardine was putting his six-shooter back inside his belt when he heard quick footsteps. He turned.

"Good evening, Miss Denny," he said with a smile.

"Oh, what was the matter?" she cried. "What made Frank Gosden want to kill you?"

"Did he want to kill me?"

"Of course he did! You know that!" Jane had forgotten that this man had two thousand dollars of her money, forgotten that she had resolved to treat him coolly. "Mr Hibbard, didn't he want to kill Mr Jardine?"

"Well, Frank did seem a trifle riled," Hibbard told her.

"Riled? There was murder in his mean face!" She turned quickly to Jardine. "Have you and Frank Gosden had trouble that I don't know about?"

"I haven't had any trouble with him, Miss Denny."

Jane compressed her lips, bit at the lower one.

"He's furious because I discharged him," she said doubtfully. "Do you suppose he has gone loco?"

"I doubt it," Hibbard replied.

"Then what made him act the way he did?" Jane queried. "He hasn't any reason to hate Mr Jardine. Is it because he thinks Mr Jardine had—"

"Something to do with your discharging him?" Jardine finished.

Jane nodded.

"Yes, but such an idea as that is absurd. You had nothing at all to do with it. I had my reasons for firing him before I ever saw you, Mr. Jardine."

JANE had noticed that Jardine had taken a position where he could watch the doorway and the lighted part of the street as if he expected Gosden to reappear. Now a twinkle came to her eyes as she asked:—

"Do mining engineers learn how to

handle six-shooters in college, Mr. Jardine?"

"Not in college," he told her soberly.

"Come, Jane," invited Hibbard. "I'm glad you came down. There is something we must discuss."

"But Frank Gosden—" she demurred, looking toward the street.

"I doubt that he'll come back to bother us," Hibbard told her. "Come, here are three chairs."

* * *

GOSDEN ignored the questions of the few men who wanted to know why he had tried to shoot Jardine. He hurried to the Antlers, where he drank two full glasses of whiskey. He snarled at the men who wanted to be friendly, even at Danforth, the owner of the saloon.

"Got a bellyache, Frank?" Danforth asked. "If you have, how about some Jamaica ginger?"

Gosden snarled. "I'll ask for what I want, and pay for it, too!" He slammed a silver dollar onto the bar.

"Go get some supper and you'll feel better," Danforth advised as he gave change.

"When I get good and ready!" Gosden retorted, and stamped out, swinging the double doors violently behind him.

Outside, he walked a little way to get out of the light. Then he stopped, dropping his squarish chin to his breast. It was still hard for him to believe that Jardine had got his gun out so quickly.

"That horse of mine!" he cursed. "If he hadn't stumbled and gone lame—"

He walked sullenly into the Elegant restaurant. He stopped and looked about. A slender, black-eyed Mexican girl came toward him.

"Where's Mary?" he growled. "What's become of Mary?"

"Mary, she is gone, *senor*," said the girl. "I have take her job. You want supper, no?"

"Fetch me some grub, pronto!" he snarled. "And see it's hot!"

When the girl returned with food and coffee, Gosden asked:—

"What'd Mary quit for?"

"Oh, you do not know, no?" asked the waitress. "She is goin' for to be marry."

"Who's she goin' to marry? I never heard about it."

The Mexican girl explained happily, breathlessly, for romance warmed her blood as it did Mary's. She drew back quickly when she saw the savage light in the man's eyes.

"*Que es, senor?*" she cried. "What is wrong? Is it that the food—"

"Grub's all right!" Gosden growled. "But what's she want to marry Colby for? He ain't worth the powder to blow his hair off!"

"No, no, no! You are wrong, *senor*. Thees Shorty Colby, he is land the ver' fine job, and that is why he and Mary are to be marry pronto!"

"Fine job, eh? Yeah, and where'd that loco hombre land any fine job, I want to know!"

GOSDEN'S eyes widened with amazement, then narrowed quickly as the girl explained.

"You say he's goin' to be wagon boss at the Bar D Bar, eh?"

"*Si, si!*" she cried happily. "He is to be the new major-domo at the Bar D Bar! Mary, she is tell me about it herself!"

"Well, I'll be damned!" Gosden muttered, then forced a smile. "Th t's all, *muchacha*. Yeah, the grub's fine."

After eating ravenously, he laid a half-dollar on the table. He stamped out as he had done at the saloon, and walked a little way to get out of the light. A passerby said:—

"Hello, Frank. Cooled off?"

"Sure," Gosden replied with a forced laugh. "Say, have you seen anything of Dave French?"

The man stopped, pondering.

"Why, yeah, Frank. A little while ago, say an hour, I passed him when he was going home. He's probably there now."

Jane was still talking with Jardine and Hibbard when French came into the hotel lobby, accompanied by Sheriff Anderson. The old sheriff smiled, a little apologetically, she thought.

"Howdy, Jim," said Hibbard. "Howdy, Dave."

Jardine rose as he saw the girl get to her feet.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said.

Jane saw the district attorney looking hard at the man who wore the old hunting coat.

"You are Richard Jardine, sir?"

"I am."

Whatever this was, Jane decided quickly, it was some of Frank Gosden's work. She was about to cry out a protest when the sheriff said:—

"Jardine I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but I have a warrant for your arrest."

"Say, what's this?" exclaimed Hibbard. "There must be some mistake, Jim!"

Anderson shrugged, and smiled as if in apology. Then he produced the warrant and was unfolding it preparatory to reading it when French said:

"There isn't any mistake, Joe."

Jane's heart raced until she thought her face and neck would burst with blood and heat. Then she paled as suddenly as she had colored.

"Oh, you can't do this!" she cried. "I saw it all! I saw it all, Mr. Hibbard! Frank Gosden came in here and tried to shoot Mr. Jardine! And Mr. Jardine beat him to the draw. He was lucky that Mr. Jardine didn't shoot him!"

French looked at her sardonically.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Jane!" he snapped. "We are arresting Jardine for murder!"

"For murder?" Joe Hibbard cried out.

"For murder?" Jane echoed in a quick gasp.

"Yes. For the murder of Matt Maggart! Read the warrant to him, Sheriff!"

CHAPTER XVIII

INDIGNATION overwhelmed the amazement of Jane when she realized fully what was going on. This must indeed be some of Frank Gosden's work. She looked at Jardine, and was the more amazed when she saw he was unperturbed.

"But they can't arrest you for that, Mr. Jardine! They can't!"

"It looks as if they are doing it."

"Yes, of course they are, but what right have they to do it? You didn't murder Matt Maggart!"

"I did kill him," Jardine said.

"Yes, to keep me from being robbed!" Jane cried. "If it hadn't been for me—" She bit at her lip, and her anger fled as she saw French's sardonic grin.

"Women have got a lot of men into trouble, Jane," remarked the district attorney.

"Yes, maybe they have, but it's too bad there isn't one to get you into trouble up to your darned neck! Dave French, this is as much your fault as anybody's! You think you can make a reputation, and get to be district judge at Mr. Jardine's expense!"

French's smile vanished.

"That's an unjust statement, Jane, and you know it."

"I know it isn't!" she flared. "Ever since you got to be prosecuting attorney you've been ambitious to be district-judge no matter what it cost anybody! And let me tell you this!"

"Yes?"

"If you run for the office of district judge I'll spend every dollar I own if necessary to beat you!"

French smiled tolerantly, as if what she said mattered little to him. He turned back to Jardine.

"You are formally charged with murder," he said. "And it is my duty to warn you that anything you say may later be used against you."

Dick Jardine's mouth drew up at one end.

"And if I tell you this is somebody's frame-up, will that be used against me, Mr. District Attorney?"

"I know nothing about any frame-up!" French retorted, angry now. "The charge was preferred. I drew the complaint. Justice of the Peace Wardner issued the warant."

"Who cares who issued the warrant?" Jane broke in. "Everybody knows old man Wardner lets you run his office anyway!"

"That's a lie!" French cried out. "And I wish you would keep out of this, Jane Denny!"

"Well, I certainly will not keep out

of it!" Jane declared. "I know how and why Matt Maggart was killed, and I don't intend to stand by and see injustice done! Do you, Mr. Hibbard?"

"I think we could talk more rationally," Hibbard told her.

"I am rational!" she insisted. "I just won't see injustice done! That's all."

"Let us talk more calmly," Jardine said.

JANE no longer remembered that he had two thousand dollars of her money that he had not offered to return. She forgot about everything except that he was being unjustly, disgracefully accused.

"But—but this means you will have to go to jail, Mr. Jardine!"

"I'm afraid it does," he answered.

"Certainly it means he'll have to go to jail!" French declared.

"Well, he won't go to jail!" Jane contended. "I have seventy-five thousand dollars in cash, and I'll put up every cent of it and mortgage my ranch, too, to bail him out!"

After an impatient shrug, French explained that murder was not a bailable offense.

"Well then, he didn't murder anybody!" Jane said hotly. "This is just somebody's frame-up!"

"Do you mind if I see your complaint, Mr. French?" put in Jardine.

"Certainly not. Here it is."

Jardine scanned the complaint quickly, then stiffened. He put a finger on one point and handed the paper to Hibbard.

"Huh! Huh!" the banker muttered a moment later. "So this seems to explain it!" He looked at French, and demanded:—

"Dave, did Frank Gosden swear to this complaint?"

"His name is there, isn't it?" French snapped. "Yes, he swore to it before Judge Wardner."

"Where is Gosden now?"

French pressed his lips together hard.

"Gosden's in my office," he confessed arrogantly.

"Oh, I see it all now!" Jane broke in. "This is Frank Gosden's way of getting even with me for firing him!" She reached a hand toward the accused man. "I'm terribly sorry for this, Mr. Jardine! Believe me, I am! If it hadn't been for me you wouldn't be in all this horrible trouble!"

Jardine smiled at her.

"Don't worry about it, Miss Denny. I have an idea it won't turn out so bad in the end."

"But—but you'll have to go to jail. You'll have to stay there, unless—"

"He'll have to go to jail!" agreed French.

"I'm sorry, Jardine," said the sheriff, "but I have no alternative but to lock you up."

JANE sat down weakly. She jumped to her feet, her eyes momentarily wide.

"Where is Mr. Hibbard? Where did he go?"

In the excitement she had not noticed that the banker had slipped out through a side doorway.

"I don't know where he went," said French. "Don't really care. Anderson, are you going to lock this man up?"

"Certainly he is," said Jardine. He drew the new Colt from his waistband, twirled it and handed it to the sheriff. "I give you my word of honor, Mr. Anderson, that this is the only weapon I have except my pocket knife."

Jane managed to stand still until Anderson and French had marched out with the prisoner between them. Then she rushed upstairs, and stood in the dark of her room while tears gushed from her eyes. For the first time in her happy life she knew the futility of riches.

She lit the lamp. She sat on the edge of the bed and stared through her tears. She lost track of time. Suddenly she jumped to her feet and began splashing cold water on her face.

"I won't let them!" she said savagely. "I won't let them keep him in jail! They think I won't fight!"

She would find Joe Hibbard. They would pool their resources, bail Dick Jardine out. If they could not do this, she herself would wire for the best criminal lawyer in all the West.

ABOUT the time Jane Denny was retreating to her room, Hibbard was ascending to French's office. He had seen before he had left the street that it was lighted.

As Hibbard opened the door and stepped into the room, Gosden, who sat in an office chair, relaxed and moved his hand away from his six-shooter. His wrinkled face looked surly, however, as he saw the banker back against the door.

Hibbard's eyes were cold, his lips compressed as Gosden had never seen them compressed before. He tried to meet the angry, contemptuous stare with equal coldness.

"You fool!" Hibbard roared. "Now you've gone and played hell!"

"Yeah? Say, who knows but that he did murder Matt Maggart?" Gosden sneered. "I got reasons to suspect he did."

Hibbard snapped an impatient, angry gesture.

"Who cares whether he murdered Maggart or not, Gosden? Now you've spoiled the only chance you ever had of making a small fortune."

"What you mean, Hibbard?" Gosden's jaw slackened. "I don't savvy."

"And I don't savvy either," swore the banker, "why you tried to dry-gulch Jardine out there on Little Clear Creek this afternoon!"

"He—"

"He told me!" declared Hibbard. "If we wanted to have anybody arrested, Frank, it could be you for attempted murder!"

Gosden scrambled to his feet, and jerked his right hand toward his pistol. Hibbard snapped his fingers as if all the six-shooters ever made did not impress him.

"Tie a rope to that stuff, Gosden!" he ordered.

"Well, he needed killin'!" Gosden snarled. "He was up there gettin' some sort of agreement or somethin' from Conrad Ells! I caught him at it!"

Hibbard smiled, then chuckled.

"Do you know why he was up there, Frank?"

"Don't know exactly," Gosden sneered, "but I know he was tryin' to put some sort of double-cross over on me!"

"He was there," Hibbard corrected, "to make a quick examination of Ells' prospect so he could report to me. I take it you heard he was a mining engineer, eh?"

Gosden stared, the surly ferocity fading from his lean, ugly face.

"Yeah, I heard he was one of them things, but what—"

HIBBARD took a cigar from a vest pocket, and touched the flame of a match to it. He turned it slowly until its end was evenly lit.

"He came back with a favorable report on the prospect, Gosden. He agrees with me that I should advise Jane Denny to pay Ells fifty thousand dollars for it."

"The hell he did!" Gosden's eyes widened and again his jaw went slack. "Huh? You say he done that?

"Here's why he did it," Hibbard said. "His father is one of my best and oldest friends, Frank. Dick did this to keep me from being disgraced by any exposure you might make."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Gosden muttered, his face clouding with bewilderment. "If I'd known he was up there for that—"

Hibbard's face suddenly lengthened. His shoulders drooped as he spread his hands in a sign of futility.

"And now you and your damned foolishness have gone and spoiled it all! You've had him arrested for the murder of Matt Maggart, who wasn't worth killing. And now he'll reverse his report on the prospect, and damned if I blame him, either!"

"No! He won't do that, will he?" Gosden cried out, his face twitching and eyes aghast. "Sure, he can't do that!"

"That's just what he will do!" Hibbard insisted. "I happen to know the stock he comes from. Now we're both disgraced. You'll expose me as a cattle thief from the Guadaloupe, and I'll tell how you and Ells planned to rob Jane Denny."

"I won't tell what I know about you, Joe!" Gosden cried out. "Not after all this! Not after all this!"

Hibbard smiled sadly.

"Go ahead and tell it; it doesn't matter to me. Nothing matters much to me now, Gosden. In all justice to myself and my family and to Jane Denny, I must confess to her that I tried to rob her."

"Do you have to do that?" Gosden begged as he visualized the flight of the fortune he had felt almost in the calloused hands, visualized prison bars, too.

"Yes! I have to do it!" declared Hibbard.

CHAPTER XIX

JANE DENNY stopped halfway down the stairs when she saw several men in the lobby. For a moment she considered turning back, then went on resolutely. As she reached the lobby men began to fire questions at her.

"Yes, of course Mr. Jardine is arrested for murder," she cried out. "And of course he didn't commit murder. I saw him kill Matt Maggart, and it was not murder!"

She had not yet finished her breathless and indignant statement, meant to answer all the questions, when Frank Gosden strode in from the street. His wild eyes swept the room.

"Where's Dave French?" he yelled. "Where's Jim Anderson?"

As she saw Gosden, Jane forgot Jardine, forgot everything except her anger toward him.

"So there you are, you lying coyote!" she cried as she faced him. Her face was pale, with only two bright, angry spots for color. Her hands were clenched. "So you quit the Bar D Bar, did you? You quit?"

The fury of her eyes made Gosden flinch back.

"Oh, never mind!" he stammered. "Never mind what I said! I don't—"

"Well, I do!" Jane declared. "I fired you, and you know it! Yes, I fired you because I had good cause to fire you!"

Men stared at the furious girl, at Gosden.

'Didn't I fire you?" she demanded. "Didn't I? Wasn't it there in Sheriff Anderson's office?"

"Yeah, yeah, you fired me, Jane!" Gosden admitted. "But what's that got to do with it now? Where's Dave French? Where's the sheriff? Where's that man, Jardine?"

"You should know!" she retorted. "You had him jailed, Frank Gosden! You know you lied in that complaint, too. I'm going to have you prosecuted for perjury!"

"Yeah, yeah, I lied about that, too," Gosden stammered. Then he gasped, and stared. "Jane, you wouldn't have me arrested for that, would you?"

"Wouldn't I?" Jane's lip curled. "You just wait and, see whether I would or not!"

Gosden swallowed hard.

"But you can't make anything out of that!" he argued. "I just swore as how, accordin' to my knowledge and belief, I reckoned as how Jardine had murdered Matt Maggart."

"Knowledge and belief? What knowledge did you have about it, anyway?"

"I reckon I didn't have much," Gosden confessed as a hang-dog look came to his face. "But let's not talk about it now, Jane."

She retorted that they were going to talk about it, but then remembered that he had told about town that he had quit her employ.

"No, Frank," she declared. "Before we talk about anything else, you must tell these men that I discharged you! Go ahead and do it!"

AFTER a sullen minute, Gosden looked at the smiling and grinning men with shifty eyes. He mumbled:—

"Yeah, she fired me. I don't know why I said I'd quit."

"Well, I know why you did it, Frank Gosden!" Jane told him. "You did it because it's as natural for you to lie as it is for water not to run uphill. How much do I owe you? I want to pay you off!"

Gosden flung up his hands. For once there was a frightened, almost pathetic look on his face.

"Jane, let's not talk about pay now. I'm not worryin' about that now! I've got somethin' more important on my mind!"

"Yes?" Jane said icily. "And what

is more important, I'd like to know!"

"What's more important? Say, we got to get Jardine out of jail! We've got to get Jardine out of jail, Jane!"

"We—we've got to get Jardine—out of jail?" Jane repeated.

"What does this mean, Gosden?" Harry Bender demanded.

As if appreciating this opportunity to talk to a man, and not to an angry girl, Gosden hastily explained that he wanted to dismiss the case against Jardine, that it had to be dismissed. Swearing to the murder complaint had been a big mistake.

"Then why did you swear to it?" Jane broke in. "You knew all the time it was a lie! You knew that! Was it because you wanted to get even with Mr. Jardine for some reason?"

Gosden's eyes shifted again. He swallowed hard.

"No, no! I didn't have any grudge against Jardine!" he declared as he waved his arms. "Likely it was because I—I liked Matt Maggart so good, Jane! Yeah, that's it, that's it. Where's Dave French? I got to find him!"

He was told that the district attorney had gone home after he had seen the prisoner locked in jail. He rushed out, and had not been gone three minutes when Joe Hibbard came in, looking tired and bored.

"Say, what is this all about, Mr. Hibbard?" Jane demanded. "What made Frank Gosden change his mind?"

"He had a change of heart after I talked with him," said the banker.

"You talked with him? Is that where you went, sir?"

"Yes, I talked with him, Jane. I made him see it was a mistake to accuse Dick of murder."

JANE was bewildered now, but she smiled, then sighed.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Hibbard! Accusing Mr. Jardine of murder was so unjust!"

Haileyville had seen excitement. It saw much more during the next two hours. Gosden found the district attorney and told him what had to be done. Together they went to the justice of the peace, who knew little about law but was a stickler for what he thought he knew.

"I can't dismiss this charge!" he roared as he stood in the doorway in his nightshirt and held a candle aloft. "I ain't got any jurisdiction in the matter!"

"But you have, Judge Wardner," French insisted. "You issued the complaint. You have the legal authority to dismiss it."

"You're a liar, Dave!" declared the old justice. "Besides, what you want it dismissed for? You was in such a hell of a stew to get it issued and have that Jardine man locked up!"

"Yes, yes, I know," French said impatiently. "I had to do it on information and belief. It was my duty as prosecuting attorney of this county."

"Then it's your duty as prosecutin' attorney of this here county to get away from here and let me sleep!" swore the old man. He slammed the door.

Gosden cursed. "What we goin' to do about it, Dave?"

"Come on," ordered French. "I ought to lock you up for causing me all this trouble with your wild imaginings, Gosden!"

They roused Allen Howard, the district judge, and explained why they had come.

"Yes, I can dismiss the matter," Judge Howard said grumpily after half an hour of argument and consideration. "But why the devil didn't you wait till morning, Dave?"

* * *

It was past midnight when Dick Jardine sauntered into the hotel. He was bareheaded, but he still wore his old corduroys and baggy hunting coat. Jane rose from the chair where she had fought drowsiness for an hour.

"Oh, I'm so glad you don't have to spend the rest of the night in jail!" she cried. "It was so unjust!"

He took the impulsively offered hand.

"It wasn't bad, Miss Denny," he said, grinning. "I had a rather interesting talk with Hurley."

"With Hurley? Oh yes, the wound-

ed bandit, the one who is in jail. What did he say?"

"It wasn't what he said, but rather what he didn't say," explained Jardine. "You see they put me in a cell next to him."

"Oh, how terrible!"

"On the contrary, I rather enjoyed it," said Jardine. "You see it was my first experience in jail. I like to be versatile in my experiences."

"But being in jail—and next door to a man who would have killed you!'

"You are very tired, aren't you?" Jardine said gently.

She smiled.

"Yes, I am tired, Mr. Jardine. If you'll excuse me now, I think I'll go to bed. I wanted to make certain you got out."

He went with her to the foot of the stairs.

"Good night, Mr. Jardine."

"Good night, Miss Denny."

She climbed a few steps, then turned.

"Aren't you going to get some rest soon?" she asked.

"Just as soon as I can find Mr. Hibbard," he replied. "I must talk with him before I turn in, Miss Denny."

* * *

SHORTY COLBY had missed all of this because he was so deeply and emphatically in love, which, after all, was the sort of excitement he wanted. It was approaching three in the morning when Shorty kissed Mary good night for the last time on the front porch of her home.

"You just have to get some sleep, honey," she told him. "You must be in shape to attend to your new job. It's so important!"

"Yeah, but it ain't as important as you, Mary."

"But if you don't keep the job you can't have me," argued the affectionate but practical Mary.

"Yeah, that's right, honey, but don't worry. I'm the durnedest best range boss in the whole state."

To Shorty the black night was brilliantly light as he made his way toward town and the hotel. He had his Stetson on the back of a head that was filled with tender thoughts. He would have whistled but for the danger of blowing Mary's kisses from his lips.

"She's sure some girl. Yessir, I'm goin' to get myself a real wife!"

He was at the rear of the plaza before he realized it. Ahead of him the courthouse and jail loomed black and silent. Beyond them was a light in the hotel office.

Crossing the plaza would cut his distance greatly. And in spite of his happiness, Shorty felt as if he wanted distance cut. He stopped, and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Gosh, I sure feel like I needed a drink, this here bein' in love is such hard work!" he told himself. He shook his head. "Nope! I told Mary I'd lay off the stuff. Besides, I got an important job and an important girl, too!"

He started across the plaza, stopped, and forgot that he was in love. To his ears had come a sound that should not have come out of the happy night. It was a rasping, grating sound. Then he heard metal striking metal, not hard but distinctly.

"Say, what's that?" Shorty asked himself, and wished he had a six-shooter. "Is that somebody tryin' to bust into that there jail?"

The dry grass muffled the sounds of Shorty's quick approach. He stopped behind a big catalpa tree and peered round its trunk.

"Yes sir! It is somebody! Well, I wonder who'd want to get out of jail bad enough to dig himself in! Why, the ornery son-of-a-gun!"

THE light of the stars enabled Shorty to make out somebody working at the rear barred window of the jail. Shorty Colby fought as he fell in love, emphatically and thoroughly. He took only time to pull off his high-heeled boots. Then he rushed. With a yip and a spring he landed atop the would-be jailbreaker. They went down together.

"Why, you!" the other man snarled in amazement. "What's the matter with you?"

"What's the matter with you?"

Shorty countered as one hand groped and the other fist pounded. "What the—"

Shorty knew the other man was fumbling for a gun. He grabbed for the pistol, and fortunately caught it before the man's hand found it. He flung it away. Then with an unexpected twist and a lurch the man gained his feet and fought free. Shorty grabbed, catching the tail of a coat. The next moment he stood panting, with the coat in his right hand. He heard the other man running.

"The son-of-a-gun!" Shorty muttered, then grinned. "Just as I figured I had him he twisted out of his coat!"

Shorty had just time to put the coat on over the one he wore when a voice called cautiously from the other side of the barred window:—

"What's the matter out there? You havin' trouble?"

"No trouble," said Shorty.

There followed a half-minute of silence.

"You helpin' him?"

"Yeah, I'm helpin' him," said Shorty. "He went for more tools. The one we had wasn't enough to pry out them damned bars."

"Then get a hustle on, you two!" growled Bill Hurley. "It won't be long till daylight, and I want to be travelin' before then. You got the horses ready?"

"Sure, sure, we got the horse ready, amigo!" Shorty declared. "My partner'll be back in ten minutes or so."

Five minutes later Shorty bow-legged it into the hotel and grinned at Harry Bender, who was habitually a night hawk.

"Goin' to bed at last, Shorty?" Bender grinned.

"Yeah, just as soon as I talk with this here Mr. Jardine, Harry. Which room's he got?"

Bender did not notice that the cowboy wore two coats. He replied that Jardine was in Number Twelve.

"Just finish telling Mary good night, Shorty?" Bender asked soberly.

"Yeah, just finished tellin' her," Shorty groaned. "You know it's the durnedest hardest work waitin' for a girl in love to get through tellin' a feller good night. You said Number Twelve, Harry?"

CHAPTER XX

SHORTY was in such a frame of mind that he would have awakened the devil himself by prodding him with a pitchfork. He rapped loudly on the door of Number Twelve. Five rooms away Jane Denny heard the sound and awoke from a troubled dream. She sat up in bed.

"What's that?" she gasped. "Oh, what's happened now?"

After a moment she decided she had heard some latecomer on his way to bed.

"And now I wonder if I can ever go back to sleep?" she murmured, and was asleep within three minutes.

* * *

"Yes?" came from the other side of the door of Number Twelve in answer to the knock.

"It's Shorty!"

"Shorty who?"

"Hell! Shorty Colby! I'm the new range boss of the Bar D Bar!"

"Yes, and you're drunk," growled the voice at the other side of the door. "Go find your own room."

"Not till I talk with you, Mr. Jardine," Shorty declared as he rattled the doorknob.

"You want to talk with me?"

"Huh! If I didn't what you reckon I'd be here for?"

Light shone through the transom. The door opened.

"Come to the point, Colby. I want to get some more sleep if that's possible. What time is it?"

"Oh, 'bout three o'clock. When a feller's in love he don't figure the time much."

Jardine had to smile.

"Did you come in here at this time of night just to tell me you're in love, man?"

"No, I know I'm that," Shorty said, and told his story briefly.

JARDINE lit a cigarette by leaning over the oil lamp.

"Let me see the coat. Shuck out of it."

Jardine took the coat and turned it.

"There ain't any mystery about who owns it," Shorty declared.

"I think I've seen it before," Jardine muttered. He began to examine the pockets. From an inner one he took a piece of wrapping paper. He unfolded it, frowning.

"That's Frank Gosden's coat," said Shorty. "Anything interestin'?"

"Yes, I see it's his coat. No, Shorty, this paper doesn't amount to much. It's a memorandum of some supplies Gosden was likely going to buy for the ranch."

"The hell it is!" Shorty blurted out happily. "Then give it to me! I'm the new foreman of the Bar D Bar. I'll get them supplies."

"I'll keep it," said Jardine.

"No sir! Give it to me!" Shorty ordered, his jaw setting. "I'm the foreman of that outfit, and if there's supplies as ought to be took out—"

Jardine folded the paper and put it into the breast pocket of his shirt.

"I'll let Miss Denny see it tomorrow, Shorty."

Shorty agreed reluctantly.

"That's all right. She'll show it to me as soon as she gets it."

Shorty now discovered that he was being critically appraised.

"Well, what's wrong?" he demanded. "Don't you believe that story I just told you?"

"Every word of it," Jardine told him. "Shorty, would you mind doing something for me?"

Shorty squinted hard.

"Say, are you a friend of Jane Denny's?"

"I hope to be one of her best friends."

"But are you her friend now?" Shorty demanded. "I mean, are you on her side no matter what happens?"

Again Jardine had to smile.

"That's exactly why I want you to do something for me, Shorty."

"Then she goes as she lays with me!" Shorty declared. "I'm for the Bar D Bar all the way. I ain't no damned fence-straddler. What do you want? Care if I have one of them tailor-mades?"

Shorty bent over the lamp chimney, sucked hard, and puffed.

"Is Miss Jane a nice girl?" Jardine remarked as if it were Jane they had been discussing.

"Huh!" Shorty snorted. "Mary's nicer."

"Sure she is!" Jardine declared, and smiled. "But don't get hot under the collar about it."

"Well, what you want me to do?"

JARDINE asked whether the new range boss of the Bar D Bar knew of the Conrad Ells prospect on Little Clear Creek.

"Sure, I savvy where that fat Dutchman and his claim is. What about 'em?"

"I want you to ride up there and tell Ells I want him in town not later than mid-afternoon tomorrow."

"Oh, tomorrow!" Shorty grimaced. "Say, this here's today."

"So it is," Jardine agreed. "I want him here not later than mid-afternoon. Shorty, will you do this for me?"

Shorty grinned.

"I promised Mary I'd see her at eight o'clock, Mr. Jardine."

"Suppose I explain to Mary?"

Shorty's eyes narrowed.

"You won't—"

"I'll agree with her that you are the best and finest man in the world, Shorty," Jardine interrupted. "I'll tell her I couldn't get along without you. I know Miss Denny can't run the ranch without your help."

Shorty inhaled very deeply, and blew out a cloud of smoke.

"That there was sure once in your life you told the truth! I don't know about the rest of the time. Yeah, I'll go, Mr. Jardine."

* * *

Though the previous day had been the most eventful in Jane Denny's life, she was to find this one almost as eventful. When she came downstairs shortly after eight, dressed in cool white linen, she saw Dick Jar-

dine talking with Mary in front of the hotel. Mary, too, wore white, and with a wide straw hat she was very beautiful.

Instead of the baggy corduroys and the old hunting-coat, Jardine had on a two-piece blue suit that Jane recognized as having been a part of Joe Hibbard's stock. His shirt was clean and white and his tie was blue. The end of a pistol butt was just visible at his left side, the barrel of the new weapon being tucked inside his waistband. On his head was the same worn Stetson he had worn the previous day.

Jane smiled warmly as she neared the two outside.

"Oh, how do you do, Miss Denny!" Mary murmured. "My, you look pretty this morning!"

"She doesn't look any the worse for wear, does she?" Jardine asked, and removed his hat. Jane noticed that he had recently been barbered.

"Mr. Jardine was just telling me that he sent Shorty on some business early this morning," Mary explained, blushing.

Jane turned twinkling eyes upon Jardine.

"Have you been taking liberties wi my new foreman?"

"I knew you wouldn't mind—if Mary doesn't. You see Mary's in love."

Mary looked at her new white shoes. When she raised her eyes there was a half-smile in them.

"I'm not such a fool over Shorty that I can't let him be away from me for a few hours, Jane."

"There's nothing foolish about being in love," Jane said. "And don't you let anybody tell you there is."

Again Mary looked at the white shoes, and color ran rampant over her face and into her blonde hair.

"It's nice," she said, "and I don't care what anybody else thinks about it."

"OF COURSE it is, Mary." Jane turned to Jardine now. "Is there any new development, Mr. Jardine?"

"I've sent Shorty for Conrad Ells, Miss Denny."

"For Conrad Ells? Why?"

Jardine said he understood she was going to buy a mine.

"Did Mr. Hibbard tell you?"

"Yes, he told me."

Jane seemed to ponder for a minute. Then she smiled.

"Will you pardon us, Mary? I have some special business I must talk over with Mr. Jardine."

"Oh, yes," cried Mary, and hurried away.

"She will be good for you at the ranch, Miss Denny," Jardine said.

"Yes," said Jane, "and I'll be glad to have her there. I'm glad she's going to marry Shorty, too. She'll keep him down to business."

"You said you wanted to talk business with me, Miss Denny."

Jane studied his face.

"About this prospect of Conrad Ells'," she said, "do you advise me to buy it? You know you said you were a mining engineer."

"Mr. Hibbard advises that you buy it, doesn't he?"

"Yes," she said doubtfully, "but I don't know whether I even want a mine. You—what do you advise?"

"I can't go against Mr. Hibbard's advice, Miss Denny."

"Then I shall buy the Ells prospect. And now, Mr. Jardine, have you had breakfast? If not, will you join me?"

"Unfortunately I have," he replied. "And I would like to talk with you when it is convenient. May I see you later?"

Jane wished she could have answered as Mary would have answered Shorty. How fortunate Mary was to be in love!

"Perhaps," she said. "I shall be pretty busy all day, though."

CHAPTER XXI

JANE stopped as she was turning into the hotel. A dust cloud was coming just beyond the southerly limits of the village. Jane smiled wryly.

"I wonder if that rig's bringing some more trouble?" she asked herself, and went to breakfast.

Jardine walked northward. He had not gone far when he saw Gosden emerge from the Antlers saloon. Jardine's gait slowed as he tensed a little. Gosden came on, head down, surly as usual. He smiled, however, as the distance between him and Jardine lessened. Jardine stopped, prepared for trouble.

"Howdy, Jardine. No hard feelin's?"

"No hard feelings on my part," returned the engineer. "You?"

"I in't got any hard feelin's," muttered Gosden. "I see now where it was a hell of a mistake."

Gosden went on as if he had said enough. Jardine slanted across the hot street to the sheriff's office.

* * *

The buckboard that Jane had seen was driven by a small, wiry man with bright, sun-squinted blue eyes and a massive gray mustache. He turned his gaunt, sweat-streaked horses into the livery stable. As he looked at Pete Travis, the hostler, his eyes had a steely glint.

"Don't water 'em for two hours!" he snapped. "Drove 'em like hell all night."

He scrambled to the floor, jerked off his long, gauntleted gloves and folded them carefully. He tucked the gloves into the waistband of his dusty trousers in such fashion that the gauntlets hung outside.

"Joe Hibbard in town?" he demanded.

Travis replied that Hibbard was likely to be at his store.

"Well, he'd better be!" the newcomer snarled, and walked briskly out.

"Well!" remarked Travis as he began to unhitch the team. "He'll feel better after he's had a drink and somethin' to eat."

THE wiry newcomer stopped just inside the store doorway. His keen eyes swept the thirty-odd thousand dollars worth of general merchandise. He sniffed and swore.

"Ain't this a hell of a thing to call a store?"

"Good morning," said Red Thomas, a clerk. "Is there something—"

"Yes, there is! Is Joe Hibbard here?"

"Why—yes," Thomas stammered. He turned. "Mr. Hibbard! Mr. Hibbard!"

The owner of the store appeared from the office. He stopped, stiffening. A peculiar look came to his face.

"Say, you durned old horsethief!" yelled the newcomer. "When'd this town get ornery enough to stand for you?" His massive mustache seemed to bristle as he stepped forward. "You low-down, ornery old cattle-rustler!" he hurled at the banker-merchant. "So you couldn't make money fast enough rustlin' cattle, so you took to sellin' shoddy and chargin' high interest, did you?"

"And I suppose you're still stealin' horses!" retorted Hibbard. "Say, how is the horse-stealin' business, Bill?"

The three clerks were now staring, but their fears were partially dispelled when they saw the two men shake hands.

"How are you, Bill?" demanded Hibbard.

"Finer'n frog-hair," growled Bill. "First rate for a horsethief. And how're you, Joe?"

"First rate for a cattle rustler, Bill. Damned if I'm not glad to see you."

"Well, I ain't glad to see you!" Bill snorted. "Because of you I had to drive all night and half the day yesterday! Where the hell's your bottle of whisky?"

"I have one in my office."

"In your office? Hell of a place to keep a bottle of whisky, but then I suppose you can't figure without it. Where is it?"

The two had been in the office for a few minutes when Dick Jardine entered the store.

"Mr. Hibbard's in his office," Thomas explained hurriedly. "But there's an old sidewinder in there with him."

"Old sidewinder, eh?"

"Yes!" ejaculated the clerk. "Listen to him swearing now!"

Jardine rapped on the office door.

"Get away from here!" an unfamiliar voice roared. "If you don't want to get shot!"

"Come in, Dick," invited Hibbard.

JARDINE went in and closed the door. The wiry little man, who clutched a bottle in one hand and a glass in the other, scowled ferociously.

"What you want?" he snorted.

"This is Dick Jardine, Bill," explained Hibbard. "Jardine, this is Old Bill."

"Howdy," Old Bill grunted. He pushed the bottle and glass forward. "Have a drink?"

Jardine, suppressing a smile, replied that he had recently had breakfast and that he did not care for a drink.

"Well, what if you have just et?" Bill demanded. "Ain't you got two stummicks? I have! Got one for liquor and 'nother one for grub. Take a drink! You'll never grow up to be a man if you don't drink."

Jardine took bottle and glass. Bill jerked a piece of plug tobacco from a hip pocket and wolfed off a chew.

"And I chaw my cud, too!" he informed the engineer. "Young man, I drove all night and half of yesterday to tell this durned cattle rustler what I think of him!"

"And I'm glad you did!" Hibbard growled. "I just wanted to get the chance to tell you what kind of a horsethief I think you are!"

"Yeah?" snarled Bill.

"Yeah. Take a drink. Jardine's had his."

Old Bill grabbed bottle and glass, but he put the glass on his left forefinger and twirled it merrily while he drank from the bottle. He slapped the bottle on the table, tossed the glass into the air and caught it. Then he slapped it to the table.

"You associate with this old cattle-rustlin' maverick?" he demanded of Jardine as he wiped a savage hand across his voluminous mustache.

"I'm afraid I do," Jardine smiled

"Afraid? Say, don't be afraid of nothin'. If you want to say anything, say you're ashamed, Dick! Anybody ought to be ashamed even to talk to this old coot!"

Hibbard coolly suggested that they sit down and talk.

"Talk hell!" Old Bill roared as he glanced at the other man. "I'm hungry! You want to see the skin on my belly? I'm that hungry my backbone's wore seven holes clean through the skin on my belly. Wait till I get hold of my durned shirt tail!"

* * *

JANE DENNY usually entered Hibbard's office without the formality of knocking. Now she opened the door, then stopped. She often heard good-natured banter at the ranch, and thought little of what she heard here.

Old Bill gasped, and began poking his shirt tail inside his pants. "Where did you come from, gal?"

"Good morning, sir," Jane said, laughing, but coloring, too.

"Well, howdy," returned Old Bill, regaining composure quickly. "Say come right here and kiss me, gal!"

To Jardine's and Hibbard's amazement, Jane did what she was ordered to do. Old Bill kept an arm about her shoulders, and she smiled into his grisled belligerent face.

"First time you ever kissed an old horsethief, wasn't it?" Bill chuckled. He jerked a thumb. "See that durned old cattle rustler there?"

"Mr Hibbard?"

"Huh! Maybe you call him that there. But when I knowed him he made his money stealin' cattle!"

His face softened a little and he grinned.

"Gal, I'll tell you confidential," he whispered, "he got to be so bad we had to run him out of the range country to save what was left of the cows."

"And I wish I had back all the horses he stole from me!" Hibbard snorted.

Jane backed away, looking from one to the other in a little fright. Then she smiled.

"You must be very good friends."

"Friends?" Bill cried out. "Say, I came all the way over here to kill him!"

"All right!" agreed Hibbard. "Go for your gun, Bill!"

Bill turned, his big mustache actually bristling.

"Why, you durned old fool!" he

growled. "You reckon I want to kill you on an empty stummick? No sir! If this here gal hadn't come in here unexpected, I'd showed you just how durne . hungry I am!"

"Jardine," Hibbard ordered, "take Bill across and get him some breakfast. Fill him up."

BILL became more savage-looking than before.

"Say," he grumbled, "you reckon I can't find the nosebag without havin' somebody buckle it on? Joe, you never did have any sense. I'm a growed-up man, and I reckon I can feed myself proper!" Old Bill linked an arm into one of Jane's. "Come on, gal; you'nd me's goin' to put on the nosebags."

"But I've just had breakfast," she protested. "I came in to talk with Mr. Hibbard."

"Aw, let him talk with himself!" Bill snorted. "It's been a durned long time since I put on the nosebag with a gal as purty as you. Come on."

"Go along with him, Jane," Hibbard advised, smiling. "You and I can talk later. He's harmless."

"Harmless!" snorted Bill, then grinned at the flushed and puzzled girl. "Say, gal if you had all the Injuns and white men I killed laid end to end, they'd stretch seven times round the world!"

"Really?"

Bill compressed his lips and almost shut his eyes.

"Well, maybe not more than six and three-quarters times," he admitted, "but there was a lot of 'em. Made one big mistake, though. I orter killed Joe Hibbard, too. Do it soon as I get somethin' to eat. Always did hate to kill a man on an empty stummick."

Hibbard said he could talk with Jane in an hour. The newcomer bristled again.

"You'll talk to her when I say you can, you old cattle rustler! Come on, gal, and tell me where I can get some grub."

It was nearly an hour later when Jane and her strange companion emerged from the hotel diningroom. He had actually made her eat another breakfast and a hearty one, which she needed, for she had eaten very little before. Old Bill was diligently using a long quill, and each time he inserted it between his teeth he flipped the sharp end out with a snapping noise.

"Jane, you're a durned nice gal!" he declared as he ran fingers through his gray, uncombed hair. "I don't know when I et a meal I enjoyed so durned much."

"Thank you, I enjoyed it, too," Jane laughed. "But I really must go now and talk with Mr. Hibbard."

Old Bill regarded her soberly and with what might have been a paternal look in his eyes.

"If you don't mind me a-mentionin' it, Jane, it seems like there's times when you look some troubled and worried."

She smiled, then sighed.

"Running a big cattle ranch is a great responsibility, Mr. Bill."

"Well then, why don't you up and marry some good man and let him run it for you?"

AS HE saw her quick color, the peculiar expression in her eyes, he glanced about. He moved a little closer, and when he whispered his bristly mustache was so close that she moved back a step.

"Say, this likely ain't much of my business," he said, "but if you're plannin' on marryin' that man Jardine, don't do it, Jane."

"Marry Mr. Jardine? Why, how absurd!"

Bill smiled, then dropped a fatherly hand on her shoulder.

"That's fine! That's just durned fine! I'm glad to see you ain't thinkin' serious about him. Confidential, that man ain't no durned good!"

Jane drew back, wanting to be indignant.

"If you ain't noticed somethin' funny about that hombre," he went on, "you orter. I mean ain't he never done anything to rouse your suspicions o. him? Say, I wouldn't trust that durned feller any further'n I could throw a big red bull uphill by the tail."

Trying to quiet her swiftly beating heart, Jane explained that she had known Jardine only two days.

"Huh! Two days!" Bill snorted.

"One look at him'd be enough for me! You go across and make your medicine talk with that old rustler, Jane, though durned if I know what any gal'd want to talk to him about! I'm goin' to amble down to the livery stable and see if that there half-witted hostler done took proper care of my team. See you later."

Jane crossed the dusty, hot street to the big store. In her mind was but one thought, that Dick Jardine still had her two thousand dollars, and that he had not mentioned it since he had taken it from her in the pass on the trail to Escarpa.

CHAPTER XXII

DICK JARDINE was sitting in the hotel lobby when he looked up. Shorty Colby had stopped his horse outside. The engineer hurried out. Shorty waved an arm.

"He's over there. He went in the back way."

"Ells?

"Yeah, Ells. How'd Mary take it?"

"It made her sick," said Jardine soberly.

"Sick?"

"From what I heard."

Shorty's blunt face looked frightened. Then he grinned.

"Hearsay's no good with me, feller. I'm going' to get direct evidence."

Dick Jardine crossed the street as Shorty trotted away. He went the length of the big store and rapped on the office door and was told to come in.

Hibbard was behind his desk. Ells, heavy and stolid, sat stiffly on a straight chair. He said:—

"Howdy, Mr. Jardine."

"How are you, Mr. Ells?"

Some legal-looking papers lay before Hibbard, who explained that he had been talking with the prospector about the claim.

"Then we are about ready to close the deal, eh?" Jardine asked.

"I think so." The banker looked at Ells. "Conrad, do you own this claim?"

The prospector's face clouded.

"I'd—I'd like to talk to Frank Gosden," he muttered.

"About what?" Jardine snapped.

Ells hesitated. His heavy-lidded eyes were opaque.

"Maybe I don't need to talk to him," he said doubtfully.

Hibbard put the papers in a pile, and held them.

"Look here, Ells!" he demanded. "If Gosden figures in this transaction at all, I wash my hands of the whole affair!"

"And so do I!" declared Jardine.

Ells licked lips suddenly dry.

"Yeah, you bet I own the claim. I don't need to talk to Gosden."

"Very well," agreed Hibbard, who had started to put the papers on his desk.

"Just a moment," Jardine requested. "Mr. Ells, are you selling this claim of your own accord and free will, and without duress being put upon you by another person?"

THE prospector was figuratively between the devil and the deep sea. If he deeded away the claim he would be in mortal fear of Gosden. If he refused to make the deal on which he had agreed, he would lose not twenty-five, but fifty thousand dollars. For a few moments he pictured himself being killed by Gosden's bullet and wondered what good fifty thousand dollars would do a dead man. Then his features set with stoical defiance.

"It's my claim!" he growled. "I can do what I like with it. I don't have to ask any other man what to do with it!"

"That's all we want to know!" Jardine agreed.

Hibbard explained that as a notary public he would acknowledge the transaction.

The prospector's eyes glowed with avarice. He was about to ask about the fifty thousand dollars when the door opened and Old Bill stood belligerently in the opening. His big mustache bristled as he looked from one man to another.

"Say, whose game am I hornin' in on?"

"Come on in and close the door, Bill," invited Hibbard.

"I don't close nobody's door!" He

closed the door and braced his back against it. "What's this?"

Jardine explained that Jane Denny was buying a mining claim from Ells.

"That so?" Bill demanded as he fixed steely-blue eyes on the banker-merchant. Hibbard nodded, and the newcomer's mustache bristled again.

"Well, I won't let 'er buy it!" he declared. "What does a gal like her know about minin', I want to know! Besides, I got the idee she's bein' skinned dealin' with you three!"

Ells struggled to his feet and spread imploring hands. He protested vehemently that the claim he was going to sell was rich, that it was very rich.

"Just the same," growled Bill, "I'm against it! That gal knows how to run cattle, but she don't know a durned thing about minin'!"

Ells looked frightened. His imploring gaze went from Hibbard to Jardine.

"Bill," said Hibbard, "do you know where Jane is?"

"Sure I know where she is! What about it?"

"Be good enough to go and fetch her, Bill."

"Be good enough?" Old Bill sneered.

"Why the hell don't you ask me if I'll go and fetch her! Well, I won't!" His mustache bristled farther. "I won't be a party to no such skin game as this!"

After uttering a few cuss words, the wiry little man turned and went out. He could be heard stamping the length of the store in his expensive high-heeled boots.

"Is he her father?" Ells whispered. Hope was almost gone from his pale popping eyes.

"He's just an old horsethief," Hibbard answered.

"An old horsethief?" the prospector gasped. "Then—"

"I think he'll bring her," put in Jardine.

THE prospector looked more bewildered than hopeless now.

"If—if you are worried about Gosden," he stammered as he decided to get the fifty thousand dollars and leave town before Gosden learned about it, "if you're worried about him—"

"Not in the least," said the engineer. "But you seem to be worried about him, Ells."

"No, no! I ain't worried about him!" Ells spread his hands and sank into his chair. "Why—why should I be worried about him?"

"I don't know," put in Hibbard.

Before more could be said, footsteps were heard approaching. Old Bill appeared once more in the doorwa . He swept off his broad hat, moved aside and let a slender girl show herself.

"Let's hear what you crooks want with Miss Denny," he growled. "I'm tellin' all of you I'm here to represent her and see she don't get even the least bit of her hide peeled off."

Jane lost color as she turned upon the wiry little man.

"But you really don't know Mr. Hibbard," she protested.

"Oh, I don't eh? Say, don't you ever turn your back on none of your cows when he's around! He's the damnedest cattle thief I ever laid eyes on, Miss Jane."

Jane eyed him keenly.

"I really think you two are very good friends, Mr. Bill."

"Good friends?" Old Bill grunted. "Say, if I had to be friends with such as him, I'd—"

"Yeah, and before I'd be friends with the likes of him," Hibbard interrupted, "durned if I wouldn't go out and pick myself an old Injun for a friend!"

"Old Injun!" Bill jeered. "Say, where's the Injun that'd let you?"

"Shut up and come on in!" Jardine ordered.

"Hey!" snorted Old Bill. "Are you a-talkin' up to me young man?"

"Yes, I'm talking to you," said Jardine, stony of face.

"Well, all right!" Bill growled. "I'm comin' in, and it's to protect the rights of this here gal."

Jane, who was already in the room, turned to him now.

"I think I'm able to take care of my own interests, Mr. Bill."

Old Bill looked at her tolerantly, then fiercely.

"Not among this bunch of crooks you can't! No sir, I'm goin' to stay here and see you get a square deal!"

"Very well." Jane shrugged as if there were no way of getting rid of this belligerent old man. "What did you want to see me about, Mr. Hibbard?"

BILL kept at Jane's side as Hibbard explained that all that was needed to close the transaction were two signatures and an acknowledgment.

"Don't buy it!" the old man ordered. "I tell you once again they're tryin' to rob you, gal!"

Jane compressed her lips to keep from telling him to mind his own affairs. She said:—

"Mr. Hibbard, do you advise me to pay fifty thousand dollars for Mr. Ells' claim?"

"Yes, Jane, I do."

Though once more she remembered the sheaf of banknotes he had put into the pocket of his old hunting-coat, Jane turned to Jardine.

"And do you, sir?"

"Yes, Miss Denny. I advise that you pay that price for the claim."

"Very well," she said with a lift of her chin. "Mr. Hibbard has never yet advised me wrongly."

"Well, I'm still warnin' you that they're skinnin' you," grunted Bill. He walked briskly to the wall, where he stood glaring. He jerked a big cigar from a vest pocket, jabbed an end of it between his lips and scratched a match as if he wanted to rip a leg of his pants out. "But go ahead and trust him if you like! I learned a long time ago never to trust a durned cattle rustler!"

Hibbard looked up from the documents he had begun to show to Jane.

"And I learned never to trust a horsethief!"

There was avarice and fear on Conrad Ells' face as he shifted his chair closer to Hibbard's desk.

"I think the deed had best be executed first," advised the banker. He showed the prospector where to sign the deed, but Ells hesitated, looking stubborn.

"But I don't see my money. Where's the money?"

Jardine explained that Jane Denny's check was the same as money. Hibbard said his bank would honor the check immediately.

"Well, if his bank don't, mine will!" Old Bill sneered.

"Your bank?" cried Jane, turning.

"Yes, my bank!" Bill told her emphatically.

Jane frowned.

"But you advised me not to invest in this mining project.

"Sure I did, and I still do!" Bill declared. "But if you're plumb set on makin' a fool of yourself I'll stand behind you till your last chip's played, gal!"

Jane shook her head.

"I really don't understand you, Mr. Bill!"

"Huh!" he snorted. "Nobody else does. That's why I understand myself so durned well. Go ahead and buy this worthless mine, but remember I warned you against it."

"But it is not a worthless mine!" Ells cried as again he spread his hands. "It is damn good mine! Have you not seen the ore from it, Mister—"

"Never seen it, and don't want to see it!" Bill snorted.

JANE began to sign a check as Ells took a pen between his thick fingers and laboriously started to affix his signature to the deed. Hibbard filled out a jurat and attached it to the deed.

"Here is your check, Mr. Ells," Jane said. She laughed a little. "And now that I have bought a mine, what am I to do with it?"

"Let them two crooks run it for you!" advised Bill.

Jane turned toward him again, her eyes flashing.

"Mr. Hibbard is not a crook, sir! He has never advised me wrongly yet!"

"Huh! He's as big a crook as that feller Jardine is!"

"Mr. Jardine is not a crook!" Jane cried, then felt a hot flush creep across her face as she remembered the two thousand dollars. "I don't care whether you trust Mr. Hibbard or not! I do!"

"All right!" Old Bill responded

with belligerent resignation. "But just you wait till you know him as good as I do!"

Jane stiffened suddenly, for Frank Gosden had silently appeared in the doorway. There was a savage, triumphant glitter in his slitted eyes. His gaze went from one man to another, then came back and rested on Ells, who was putting down the pen.

"Well! So this is the way you tried to put the double-cross on me, is it, Dutchy?" he snarled. "I might have known it would be somethin' like this if Joe Hibbard had anything to do with it! Well, by grab, this deal don't go through!"

Jane leaped to her feet and moved swiftly toward the wall as she saw Gosden's right hand sweep upward. She did not see the greater swiftness of Jardine's hand.

"Don't!" barked the engineer, and his voice was as ominous as the new forty-four Colt that had got into his hand. "Stop it, Gosden!"

CHAPTER XXIII

JANE stared, and drew in a quick breath as Gosden refused to surrender his pistol. The men were now on their feet. Jane jumped to hers.

"Go ahead and take it!" Gosden defied. "If you're a gun-slinger, let's see you use your hardware!"

"Give him your gun, Frank!" Jane ordered. "You know he has the drop on you."

Just when it looked as if nothing could stop gunplay, for Gosden was grabbing insanely for his pistol, a hand reached in from behind and clutched the wrist of the former Bar D Bar foreman.

"That's fine, Sheriff," Jardine said coolly. "I don't want to be forced to shoot him."

"Oh, Sheriff Anderson!" Jane gasped. "Where did you come from?"

"Just happened to wander in by way of the back door," answered the sheriff as he took Gosden's weapon.

Gosden was forced into the room and ordered to stand against the wall. His eyes were blazing with wrath. They fixed upon Ells, who clutched the check avidly.

"Say, what sort of game is this?" he swore. "If that claim's been sold, I want half the money!"

"The claim has been sold," said Hibbard as he sat down.

"Yeah, for how much?" Gosden demanded.

"Fifty thousand dollars," returned the banker.

"Then I want half of it!" snarled Gosden.

"No! No! You can't have it!" Ells panted.

"Why not start suit to recover it if it is due you?" Hibbard asked.

Before Gosden could answer Jardine said:—

"He won't sue."

"Just why won't I sue if I don't get half this money?"

"Because we are prepared to prove that you and Ells entered into a conspiracy to rob Miss Denny of fifty thousand dollars," Jardine replied.

"No, no, no!" broke in Ells. "We didn't do that! It is a good mine I have sold her. It is worth a hundred thousand dollars!"

Jardine turned to the prospector. "Then why didn't you ask a hundred thousand dollars for it?"

Ells gulped, licking dry lips.

"Have I been robbed of fifty thousand dollars? Have I?" cried Jane.

"I advised you to buy the claim, didn't I?" Hibbard queried.

"And that was my advice, too," Jardine added.

JANE looked at one man, then the other. She looked at Ells, at Gosden, even at the sheriff for explanation.

"I just don't understand!" she declared. "If the mine is no good—Some of you say it is and some of you say it isn't!"

Suddenly all Gosden's wrath was turned upon Hibbard. He cursed and accused him.

"And you crooked old maverick!" Gosden railed. "How did you get all the money to start in business and rob people? I'll tell you how you got it! You got it from rustlin' Bill Dinsmore's cattle in the Guadaloupe!"

Nobody noticed when Old Bill removed the cigar from his lips, but all saw when he stepped forward, right

hand grasping the heavy gauntlets that were still tucked into the waistband of his overalls. He leaned toward Gosden.

"Just a minute, hombre!" Old Bill ordered. "Did I happen to hear my name mentioned?"

"No, you didn't!" Gosden snarled. "And you keep out of this! When I want to hear your talk I'll ask for it!"

An entirely mirthless smile lifted one end of old Bill's great mustache.

"You'll ask for it, will you?" he drawled.

"Yes, I'll ask for it!" Gosden cursed. "Keep still, you—"

Then Gosden snapped back against the wall so hard that his head bumped. Like the reports of two firecrackers, the heavy gauntlets had smitten Gosden across one side of the face, then across the other. Old Bill stood tensed, ready for another blow.

"What's the matter with you?" Gosden panted as he rubbed his stinging face.

"Nothin' a-tall except that I find myself mad," Bill said, and he seemed cool now. "And when I get mad I'm a tough hombre to stop talkin', Gosden. Now you just wait a minute. You claim Joe Hibbard made his start by stealin' Bill Dinsmore's cattle?"

"Yes, he did!" Gosden declared. "That's how he made it! I got proof!"

"You're a durned liar, Gosden!" Old Bill lifted the gauntlets. "What sort of proof you got?"

Gosden declared that he knew of five cowboys who would swear they had helped Hibbard rustle Dinsmore's cattle.

"Well, who are they?"

"Never mind who they are! I'll get them when they are needed!"

JANE stared at Hibbard with a new light in her eyes. If he had made his start by rustling cattle, would he hesitate at robbing her? And why had Jardine not offered to give back her two thousand dollars?

She whirled as she heard the third smack of the heavy cuffs. She gasped as Gosden jerked back and bumped against the wall.

"You ever seen Bill Dinsmore?" the wiry little man demanded as he slapped his left palm with the cuffs.

"No, I ain't, but—" Gosden growled.

"You'ree a durned liar, because you're lookin' at him now!" corrected Bill as he hit the left palm again.

After a surly, snarling comment, Gosden's jaw dropped. He stared, and stammered:—

"You—you ain't—"

"Yes, I am! And I'm here because I 'most drove the tails off my team to get here after I got Joe Hibbard's tellygram. And if you want to see a square man, just take a squint at old Joe Hibbard over there!"

"He's a damned thief!" Gosden muttered. "He's a slick crook! That's what—"

Jane found that she had cause for new incredulity. She grasped Jardine's arm.

"Is he—"

Because the engineer did not reply she drew quickly away.

"Yeah, I'm Bill Dinsmore," resumed the wiry little man, "and if it'll do you any good, Joe Hibbard and me's been pardners in the Guadaloupe ever since we first hit it forty years ago. Now, do you think Joe'd steal his own cattle? He still owns half the big Anchor Brand ranch."

"I don't believe it! It's just part of a scheme to rob me out of my twenty-five thousand dollars," Gosden growled.

As if he needed confirmation, Jane turned to Hibbard.

"Yes, it's true," he said, "and what's more, Bill Dinsmore, he owns half this here store and half the bank that I'm supposed to own. We agreed to run our businesses that way, he to run the ranch as if he owned all of it, and me to run the store and the bank."

"I—I didn't suspect anything like that!" she whispered. "So that's it!"

"Well, what if you are partners?" Gosden demanded. "I don't see where that has anything to do with me. I want half of what that crook, Ells, sold that claim for."

Jane noticed the steely glitter of Jardine's eyes as they held upon Gosden.

"Very well," the engineer told him, "if you have something tangible to show that you own half the claim, we'll consider it."

"Yes," agreed Hibbard, "we want to see full justice done."

"Full justice!" Gosden sneered. "Say, this is sure one fine outfit to get full justice out of!"

"What do you know about justice?" Jane demanded.

Jardine turned and smiled at her, and motioned her to silence.

"Oh, very well!"

"Well, where is your proof, Gosden?" Jardine asked. "It must be written proof."

THERE was a pathetic stare in Ells' pale pop eyes. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined that he would own as much money as that represented in the check he clutched until it was crumpled in his hand.

"I got the proof!" Gosden mumbled, and looked about with shifty eyes.

"Very well," agreed Jardine, "let's see it."

Gosden started to fumble through his vest pockets. He stopped when he heard Jardine's laugh.

"Well, what's so funny?"

"You lost your coat, didn't you, Gosden?"

"No, I didn't!" the former range boss sneered. "But what if I did?"

"Only this, Gosden. In that coat was the agreement you and Ells had made to rob Miss Denny. I happen to have that little piece of paper, and with it as evidence we can convict both you and Ells of the conspiracy."

"Yeah?" Gosden swallowed hard. "Where'd you get that paper?"

Jane, turning, saw the pathetic look on the prospector's face.

"Oh, I don't want to prosecute Mr. Ells!" she cried. "He is just a poor prospector!"

Again Jardine turned to smile at her. He said:—

"I rather agree with you on that, Miss Denny. Did you know that Gosden tried to break into the jail last night?"

"Oh no, I didn't! But it's a pity he didn't get in and stay there!"

Now, to her further bewilderment, Jardine said that Gosden had tried to break into the jail to liberate Bill Hurley.

"That's a lie!" Gosden denied, but his eyes shifted. "I didn't! But what would I want to let Bill Hurley out for?"

"Because he is your brother," Jardine informed him calmly.

"My brother?" Gosden croaked. "Say, I never saw him—"

Sheriff Anderson interrupted to explain that Brother Bill had not only talked, but that he had confessed everything. He had come to the region at Gosden's request and for the express purpose of stealing Bar D Bar cattle in conjunction with Matt Maggart.

JANE faced the man who had long been foreman for her father, then for her.

"Now I see it all! I see why you really wanted me to take that money to Escarpa to Mr. Kilpatrick, Frank! After all my father did for you! After all I've done for you!"

Jane suddenly turned away from her discharged foreman, and looked at Hibbard and then at Jardine.

"How do you know he really tried to break into the jail to let—"

"Oh, I just happened to run acrost him," said a voice from the doorway. "I was on my way back to the hotel from seein' Mary."

Jane whirled, gasping.

"Shorty Colby!"

Mary, who stood just back of her grinning fiance, was not pink but pale with excitement now.

"Oh!" she gasped, and grabbed Shorty's arm.

"Seems like a sort of excited party, don't it?" drawled the new range boss of the Bar D Bar.

"I think the excitement is about over," Jardine remarked.

"Yes, it's about over for the present," agreed the sheriff as he prepared to put the handcuffs onto Gosden's wrists. "You will prefer charges against Frank?"

"Charges of trying to force the jail to liberate a prisoner," returned Jardine. "I think that will do for the present."

As Anderson led Gosden away, Bill Dinsmore's eyes began to wink as they regarded Mary, who had run into the room to stand close to Jane's chair.

"Well, how do you do, honey?" Old Bill asked soberly. He turned to point a forefinger. "Is it true that you're in love with that there hombre? Say, he looks to me like a horned toad standin' up on his two hind legs."

"Oh yes!" cried Mary, turning pink now. "I do love Shorty!"

"Well, by golly!" Bill ejaculated. He turned and thrust out a hand. "Howdy there, Shorty, you durned old cuss! You recollect the time when you used to punch cows for me down in the Guadaloupe? You was just a kid then. I'm sure glad to see you've growed up into a full sized horn toad that can stand up on its own hind legs."

"Yes, I recollect those times, Mr. Dinsmore," grinned Shorty. "How are you, sir?"

"Me? I'm finer'n frog-hair!" Old Bill put his big mustache close to one of Shorty's big ears, but he kept one twinkling eye on the girls. "Say, is it true that she sort of loves you, Shorty?"

"She says she does," Shorty whispered back. "But you might ask her."

Bill did not do this, but rammed a hand into a sagging pocket of his overalls and jerked out a long buckskin purse which he tossed at the blushing Mary.

Somehow she managed to catch it. It's weight made her eyes widen, her color vanish.

"What—what—" she stammered. "It's so heavy it feels like gold! What am I to—"

"Sure it's gold!" laughed Bill Dinsmore. "Say, me and Joe Hibbard don't deal in silver dinero. It's too common."

CHAPTER XXIV

ONE late afternoon Shorty Colby approached the Bar D Bar headquarters from the southerly foothills and saw Jane Denny standing in the path in front of the ranch house.

"Durned if she ain't there again!" Shorty told himself.

Jane looked up as he came near. She smiled.

"Hello, Shorty."

"Howdy, boss." Shorty gave a brief report of the range he had ridden that day, then crooked a short leg about the saddle horn. He rolled and lit a cigaret.

Looking at him, it came to Jane Denny how little she really had. Here was Shorty with his hundred dollars a month, and he had all he wanted. And here she was with her thousands of acres of range and thousands of head of cattle and thousands of dollars in the bank, and she felt as if she had nothing that mattered. Often, however, her common sense assured her that if she were sensible she would not be unhappy and restless and discontented.

"Run acrost Lou Porter over on Little Clear Crick," Shorty offered. "He told me Gosden and Brother Bill got ten years apiece."

Shorty turned toward a knoll two hundred yards away where, to the accompaniment of hammers and saws, a small cottage was rising.

"She's sure growin'," he said. "It'll be done in two weeks?"

"Not more than three," replied Jane. With a shock she realized that her only recent periods of real happiness had been when she had been watching the building of the small house where Shorty and Mary were to live.

"Well," grinned Shorty, "I reckon I can stand it for three weeks more. Say, that dinero Mr. Dinsmore give us is sure goin' to buy us some handsome furnishin's."

Jane did not reply. The new foreman looked keenly at her.

"Boss, it strikes me you ain't feelin' so well."

Jane smiled wistfully.

"No, Shorty, I'm not feeling so very well."

"Then why don't you go way some place for a spell?" Shorty suggested. "You can afford it, and likely I can

manage to run the cows while you're gone."

"Oh yes, you can run the ranch, Shorty. I'll confess that I'm more than satisfied with you." She was thoughtful for a while. "Yes, I think I shall go away for a while."

"That's fine! Stay as long as you like, boss. When Mary gets here this ranch'll sure be run right."

"As if I didn't run it right," laughed Jane.

SHORTY'S tanned, blunt face turned brick red.

"Aw, I didn't mean that boss. Of course you run it right. If you want proof of that, just take a look at the hombre you hired for a wagon boss."

"I make mistakes, Shorty."

"Not when you hired me!" he told her. "If you don't believe that, just ask Mary."

She laughed, but when the ripple of mirth was gone the somber mood was upon her again.

She knew she had not made a mistake when she had bought the Ells prospect. Already there was a wagon road along Little Clear Creek, and daily heavy outfits were rumbling down it with ore bound for Haileyville, thence to the railroad and smelters. This ore, according to Dick Jardine's reports, was worth five hundred dollars a ton.

Soon after she had bought the prospect she had been told that Hibbard had sent Jardine to examine it, and that the engineer had discovered a big body of ore which Ells had overlooked. Yet even with this certainty of added riches she was still haunted by the knowledge that Dick Jardine had two thousand dollars of her money, and that he had not mentioned it since that eventful day he had taken it there in the pass that led to Escarpa. She did not want the money for its intrinsic worth. If she had it back she would give it to some deserving person. But she did want to know that Dick Jardine was not the sort of a man to keep what was not rightfully his.

"Just when you figurin' on makin' this here trip?" Shorty asked.

Jane hesitated, pondering, while she looked toward the noisy knoll.

"I should wait till the new house is finished, Shorty. I told Mary I'd give you two a housewarming."

"Aw shucks!" he deprecated. "That'll be all right. You light out whenever you like. Mary'll savvy. She's a girl that savvies a lot."

"Mary is sweet, Shorty."

Then Shorty rubbed the end of his stubby nose with the end of a stubby forefinger and began to do some real thinking. Was it possible that he and Mary had monopolized all the happiness and romance?

KILL, KILL, KILLED!

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"Well now, I wonder!" he asked himself. "She sure don't look like she had any cause to be sick."

Jane's eyes were bright for the next few minutes while she told of improvements she had ordered added to the new house.

"That's sure fine, boss!" he agreed. "You're one fine lady to work for, you are! You reckon I ought to ride in this evenin' and tell Mary all about 'em?"

"I think Mary would like to know," Jane said, and her lips quivered. Shorty was not certain whether or not this trembling of her lips was because she wanted to laugh at him and his romance.

"I reckon I will be ridin' in," he said, trying to be casual. "I'll be back on the job in the mornin', boss."

* * *

JANE did not realize how often she had stood in front of the ranch house and stared at the horizon. She did not like things to be far away and vague. She wanted all life to be near and real and honest.

She was standing there late the next afternoon when she saw a rider approaching from the southerly foothills. It could not be Shorty. He had had dinner at the cookhouse and ridden off in another direction.

It was not long before Jane identified the approaching rider. He was wearing baggy corduroys and half-boots, an old Stetson, and an old hunting coat.

As Dick Jardine rode near, she smiled reservedly at him, and said:—

"Hello."

"Hello, Miss Denny."

He dismounted, and Jane saw that the old corduroys were threadbare in spots, and that the coat was streaked with black mud put there by much crawling through mine stopes and low tunnels. His old boots looked as if they needed shearing. She had learned from Joe Hibbard, however, that Jardine did not wear old clothes because he did not have the money to buy others.

Hibbard had told her Jardine was comparatively rich, and that his father was richer. She was grateful to Dick because he had forsaken a lucrative practice of mining engineering to run her mine. Without him she would have felt helpless indeed.

"I met Shorty this afternoon," he remarked. "He told me you were going away, Miss Denny."

Jane nodded, smiling.

"Yes."

Her eyes brightened and her heart beat faster with hope as she saw him put a hand into the mysterious inner depths of the hunting coat. Was he going to produce the two thousand dollars at last? He brought out a packet of documents neatly held by a rubber band.

"I though I had best come over and give you a complete report," he said. "Can't we go over there to the steps and sit down while I explain? I'll admit I'm a little tired."

FOR a full hour she sat and listened, although she wanted to beg him to tell her why he had not returned her two thousand dollars. She drew in a quick, deep breath at last.

"Why, what's wrong?" Jardine demanded. "Are you ill?"

"I can't tell you now," she said. "I must see—Please wait a few minutes."

She ran up the steps and into the house. He followed, but remained upon the wide porch. From there he could hear the frantic ripping of papers, occasionally a quick breath. Suddenly Jane appeared in the doorway with a sheet of letter paper in her hand.

"Here—here it is," she said.

"Here is what?"

She held the paper toward him. He took it and glanced at it briefly. When he looked up there was puzzlement in his eyes.

"It's just the receipt from John Kilpatrick for the two thousand dollars, Miss Denny."

"Of course it is!" she said, wanting to laugh and to cry. Would it be too late for him to understand? "Oh, I have been such a fool!"

Jardine's brows drew down.

"Didn't Mr. Hibbard tell you about it?" he demanded.

She shook her head.

"He didn't tell me anything about it."

"But I gave it to him the day you and I first met. I asked him to send it to Mr. Kilpatrick at Escarpa, Miss Denny. I thought you had had enough to do that day."

She tried to laugh.

"Oh, I am such a fool, Mr. Jardine! It's this way. Whenever I think letters are of no importance I put them in a drawer for future reading. This was one of them, and—"

"I see," he drawled. "This seems to explain a lot. This will probably account for all the frigidity and standoffishness, eh?"

Jane nodded her dark head. She wished that he would go away, for she wanted to cry in solitude and be thoroughly ashamed of herself.

"And you thought I had stolen it?" he asked.

Again she nodded.

"Oh, please don't blame me, Mr. Jardine! It was all Mr. Hibbard's fault. He should have told me."

"No," he corrected, "I should have told you. In fact, I should have turned the money over to you. I took it that Mr. Hibbard transacted much of your business for you."

Suddenly her hands reached out to him. Her lips trembled and her blue-green eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, please don't think I believe you a thief!" she begged. "Don't you see—"

He caught her wrists and held them firmly, yet with a gentleness that told of his strength.

"What I see is that you need a business manager," he said gravely, though there was a strange twinkle in his usually steely eyes.

"Perhaps I do." She found that she could laugh now. "Would you—would you—"

"Like that job?" he supplied, and slipped an arm about her shoulders.

She hid her face against the warm hunting coat and sobbed for a few moments, though she was very conscious of the strong arm that held her. At last she lifted her face and smiled.

"Have I—have I hired a business manager, Dick?"

Dick Jardine bent and kissed her.

"You've got one, Jane. But I don't say you've hired him."

THE END

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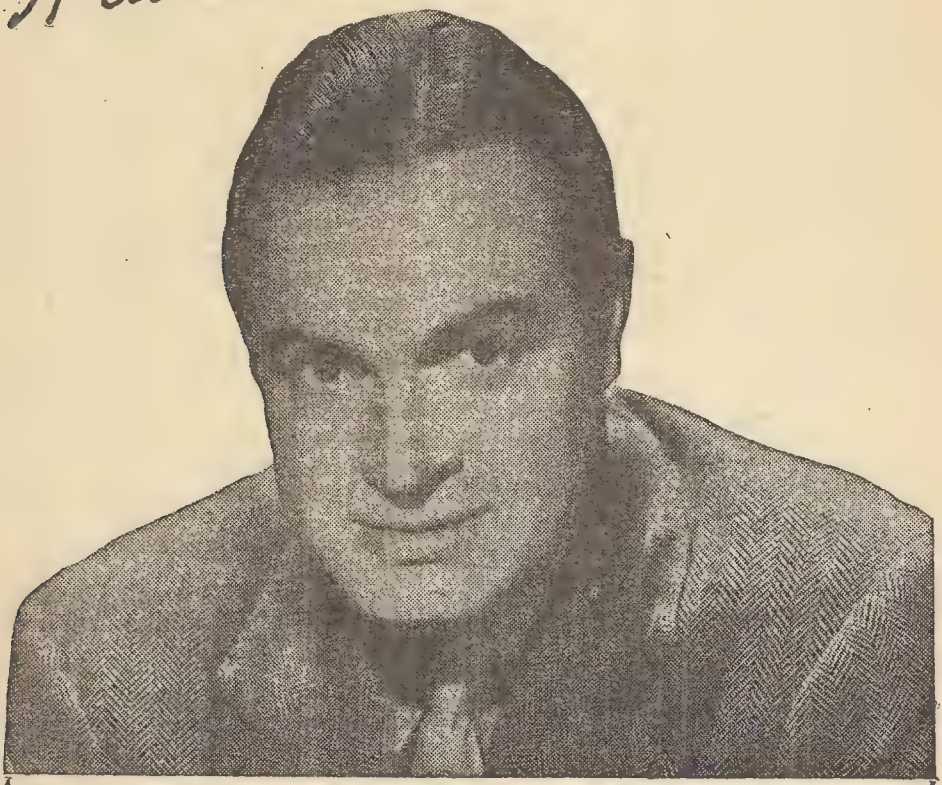
CRACK DETECTIVE STORIES

September

It doesn't make sense, folks



A man's a fool to go around with his pants pocket burning with extra folding money when he ought to buy an extra Bond, because that loose lettuce is the stuff inflation is made of. When that extra dough goes hunting for civilian goods (that are as hard to find as Crosby in a tuxedo!), it tends to push up prices. Besides, it doesn't make sense when twelve million kids are fighting our battle for any of us to hike up the cost of living by buying anything we can live without.

ONE PERSON CAN START IT!

You give inflation a boost . . .

—when you buy anything you can do without

—when you buy above ceiling or without giving up stamps (Black Market!)

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HELP US KEEP PRICES DOWN

A United States War message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Office of War Information; and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America

The idea of Dean Hawk—lawman was hilarious!

SATAN'S BULLET TRIO

By Charles D. Richardson, Jr.

Dean Hawk *found that a gent can outslick himself very simply!*

IT WAS a cockeyed stunt, three wanted gunmen going into a sheriff's office dressed as lawmen. But then, as Dean Hawk opined, the world was a cockeyed joint, and if you didn't take some chances you never got anywhere.

Hawk, the sullen-faced gent with the marshal's badge on his chest, strode up to Sheriff Cap Purvis's desk, trailed by his two pards, Brasher and Polly with their deputy outfits.

"Sheriff," Hawk said easily, "I'm Marshal Tom Lashman from Crockett County and these gents are Deputies Payne and Arnhoff. We've come a helluva long way to get three outlaws, 'Satan's Trio,' they're called and their leader goes by the handle of Hawk. Ever hear of 'em?"

Sheriff Purvis of Pinwheel town was a man in his late seventies. Honest toil was etched in his wrinkled face and his back was bowed, his hair snowwhite. Only his eyes weren't old and they glowed with a life-fire that would not be quenched. His frame might crumble; his spirit never.

"Hear of 'em?" he wheezed, "I'll say I have. The whole range's lookin' for 'em. No town's safe with them hombres on the loose. I been hopin' like blazes they'd pass Pinwheel up. I, uh, ain't exactly as spry as I usta be, and been havin' a tough time holdin' down my job. Some folks are sayin' I oughta quit. I got enough trouble without any Satan's Trio mess."

Dean Hawk smiled. He was a man who never smiled with his eyes.

"That's what we're here for," he said. "Purvis, we heard your bank was gettin' a big cash shipment and we knew Hawk and his pals were headed this way. We rode here fast as we could. Them skunks seldom pass up a bank; we'll put a crimp in that."

Cap Purvis sank into his chair with a deep sigh. "Boy, that's the best news I've heard in a lifetime," he murmured. "Knowed I'd be up against it with them gunnies. You don't know what this means to me, son. Oh, Dora," he swiveled about toward a door behind him. "Come out here a minute."

A slim, dark girl came in. Hardly nineteen, Hawk figured, and he'd never seen a more beautiful face—angelic, with all the glow of eager youth. "Dora," Sheriff Purvis said, "I want you to meet Marshal Lashman and his deputies. They're gonna help me out in case Dean Hawk and his men show up."

Hawk, Jim Brasher, and Meat Polly removed their hats. Dean Hawk

could scarcely repress a grin. An old man and a slip of a girl: what a set-up!

"Glad to meetcha, miss," Hawk acknowledged. "Like your dad said, we're here to help. We'll keep any slick-fingered gent from friskin' your bank."

Dora Purvis's small hand gave Hawk's a squeeze. "Thank you," she said warmly, her voice soft like velvet. "Dad's needed help long before he'd admit it."

"Now, daughter," protested old Cap, "yuh needn't go inta that. I told 'em the facts. But I am grateful, Lashman. It's a load off my chest to know the fifty grand comin' Wednesday will be safe."

"Yes," said Dean Hawk quietly, "We'll see it never leaves us."

THE two "deputies" broke into guffaws as soon as they were clear of the office. Brasher hugged his pot belly, Meat Polly shaking with mirth.

"D—damn funniest thing I ever saw," Jim Brasher choked. "Them two—swallerin' the works like a kid an' Santa Claus. They really believe we're the law. Hell, that's rich!"

"Yeah," said Meat Polly, "An' wait'll they find us gone with the cash. Man alive, I'd like to see the look on the old coot's puss then. Ha! Ha!"

Dean Hawk was cleaning his gun. Not the suspicion of a smile split his rock face. "When you're through your high-power bellerin', you might recall who we are. We don't want attention our way too much. The sooner we pull the job and skip, the better."

The gunman's chill voice sobered them. Like Hawk, Brasher and Polly realized the chances they took. Only last night the three of them had backtrailed the real Lashman and his deputies, hot after them for a feed-store robbery. They'd slugged the officers and left them tied in an old deserted line camp. Then they'd hit on the plan of changing clothes and making a sucker out of Pinwheel town.

If he had laughed, Dean Hawk couldn't be blamed. It was funny as hell, the three of them besting the law and using it as a cover-up for their dirty work. Dean Hawk grunted, blew again through his .45 barrel. Short end of the horn for suckers, was his creed, and the devil take the hindmost. It wasn't sweat off his temple if old Purvis would suffer from the Pinwheel Bank robbery. Main thing was pull the thing off without a hitch.

That was Dean Hawk for you. Never knowing a woman's love—his mother had died in childbirth—he had grown up with his quick-trigger father, hating the law and all it stood for. He'd hated his old man too, for the way the latter would beat him, had laughed when the elder Hawk had been shot down by a kid lawman. Then and there Dean Hawk resolved never to trust anyone and to see to it that the law itself never caught up with him.

Brasher and Polly were a couple of dumb fools he used for his convenience. He knew they were too thick to ever consider crossing him.

TWO more days until the fifty grand would be coming in. Hawk and his pals fretted. To play safe, they hung around the sheriff's office a lot, and they took up quickly Cap's offer to board out at his house.

Dora Purvis was a fine cook and for some reason had taken a shine to Dean Hawk. She maneuvered the table setting so that Hawk was next to her.

"It must be wonderful," the girl murmured, "to be a lawman, making life safe and peaceful for folks. You should be very proud of what you are doing."

Dean Hawk looked down at the syrup she had poured on his flapjacks. "Yeah," he said. "I guess maybeso I am."

It sort of made him sore; seeing Jim and Meat grinning then. The hell he wasn't proud of what he was doing. How many gents had the guts to fool the law the way he was?

"Dad," Dora continuing softly, "hasn't told you everything. The town's clamoring for his resignation. They've given him a week to prove

he oughtn't to turn his badge over to a younger man. If the bank was to be robbed, it would mean his finish. But I know that can't happen now, thanks to you, Tom."

It didn't seem brazen, her calling him by his first name so soon. With a start, Hawk realized that he'd never known a girl like this before. She was the kind of girl he dreamed about, when he wasn't out gunning down gents and taking their dough. The kind of girl Hawk visioned as being his, some day, knowing at the same time that it was a hair-brained thought. No woman was for him, Dean Hawk, the gent with the stone heart and a hate for law and all mankind.

To hell with women and the fools they made of men. They wouldn't ever make a fool of Dean Hawk, by damn!

WEDNESDAY night was cloudy, with a sick moon riding half-heartedly on the east. Hawk, Brasher and Polly hooked on their gunbelts, picked up the rifles old Purvis had furnished them with. Purvis, feeling at his own gunless hips, looked at the pseudo lawmen before him.

"You shore you don't need me?" he asked wistfully. "Mebbe it'd look better for me to trail along. Folks here in Pinwheel are mighty critical about wantin' results."

Meat Polly gave him a playful poke. "Now take it easy, Pop," he said. "No use of you settin' up all night at that bank. We'll take care of everything. Besides, maybe there won't be no holdup attempt at all."

"Hell, no," laughed Jim Brasher. "We can call you if we need yuh. Hit the hay, old timer. See yuh in the morning. G'night."

"So long," said Dean Hawk.

Out in the shadows where he was saddling up, Hawk was stopped a minute by the girl. Dora Purvis put her hand on his. The sweet girl-smell of her intoxicated Hawk.

"I just wanted you to know," she whispered, and Hawk had to bend down to hear, "how I appreciate what you're doing for dad. I—we don't want you taking risks. Be careful, Tom, please."

With a sudden, swift movement she raised on tiptoe, kissed him full on the lips. Then she was running like a deer back to the house.

In a daze, Dean Hawk mounted, rode after the others into the gloom. That kiss was one of gratitude; he couldn't kid himself it was more. But it did something to his system. Mad him feel for the first time what love. . .real love, mght be like. Then Hawk was shaking himself like a dog, shaking off this thing that threatened to ensnare him.

Dean Hawk cursed. "Coming," he whipped at the impatient pair ahead.

They slipped silently into the grove of trees by the bank. No one else in sight. Almost too easy, this. Fifteen minutes later, and Jim and Meat had forced their way through the rear window.

Dean Hawk rode around the bank. He could visualize the thing—Meat breaking into the cashboxes, Jim stuffing the loot into the sack they'd brought. Into that sack went the cash—and something else. The hopes and pride and confidence of an old man and a beautiful girl. Cap and Dora were counting on Hawk and his men. They were resting now with the assurance that everything would be all right.

Cap and Dora. Trusting old age and blooming womanhood. A tender form pressing, red lips giving—

Hawk gulped. Slammed himself from his horse he slid within the bank. No! He couldn't go through with it! Not at that price. To hell with the money. Dean Hawk moved in before his pards, guns gripped.

"Drop it," he said quietly. "The cash stays."

Jim Brasher went stiff and Meat Polly dropped the bag he was holding. "Hawk," said Jim tensely, "you gone bats?"

"Not bats," Hak said quietly, "soft. I'm savin' an old man his job. Raise those mitts and turn around."

Meat Polly's catlike form had swooped to a low crouch. "I'll be

damned if I will!" He brought his gun up, spitting at Dean Hawk.

THE LEAN outlaw winced as sharp pain bit his side. He jerked two quick shots at his pardners, snatched the bag and dove for the window. A shower of lead trailed him.

Hawk stumbled for his horse—managed to mount, ride. Before old Cap Purvis's house he stopped and flung himself to the ground. There was a light in Cap's parlor. The old fellow was sitting up, reading—evidently on hand in case Hawk should need him. Dean Hawk staggered in, dropped the money bag at the lawman's side.

"Safe and sound," he gasped, "but those outlaw skunks're gettin' away. Sit tight, Cap. Me an' the boys'll smoke 'em down."

He was plunging from the room, out into the dark for his horse. Hoofs drummed on the hard packed earth.

Hawk rode to the western edge of town. He didn't want to meet up with Brasher and Polly, for if he did, he might have to kill them. In that moment at the bank, Hawk saw that. His pards had put up a healthy argument. Dean Hawk spurred.

He came out from a tree clump full in view of a group of armed men.

"There he is!" clipped a voice Hawk recognized as Brasher's. "Get him, marshal!"

Hawk was cornered. The three before him, dressed in shabby, dusty clothes, were the real Lashman and his deputies. They had finally burst their bonds, kept right on after the men who had slugged them.

On nearby horses were Jim and Meat and their hands were roped to their saddlehorns.

"Where at's the dinero, Hawk?" Marshal Tom Lashman bellowed. "No tricks now. We've got you covered."

Dean Hawk's sullen eyes roved to the sides. Not a chance for a break. "I left it with Sheriff Purvis. He thinks me and Jim and Meat are you boys, helpin' him. Purvis's got the dough, Lashman. I couldn't go through with it."

Marshal Lashman frowned, shifted his rifle. "Expect me to believe that? Get his guns, Arnhoff. We'll take those buzzards over to Purvis right now."

The little party trotted down the dimly-lit street, reined up by the Purvis cottage. Dean Hawk's lips were a tight line in his sombre face. Now Dora and old Cap would know. Hawk swallowed, choked back a curse. Somehow, he knew he wouldn't be able to look them in the face then.

Old Cap was in the doorway, squinting out. The men outside were indistinct shapes to him. "That you, Tom? Thank the Lord for that. I been watchin' this bank money like a hawk. Was afeared them bandits might backtrack and make another play for—"

Lashman and his men were directly behind the three outlaws. The marshal gave a funny grunt, cleared his throat. Suddenly, he pulled his hat lower over his face, rode into the moonlight where the old man could see him. He had his rifle behind him.

"Keep your traps shut and watch those outlaws," he snapped in a low voice to his deputies. Then aloud to Cap Purvis, "Backtrack hell—that damn Lashman caught us just as we was makin' a getaway. Go on, Marshal, take us to prison while yuh can. Because if we ever gets loose, it'll just be too bad."

HE MOVED his bronc up past Dean Hawk. "Folow us, fella," he said from the corner of his mouth, "and don't try no tricks. We've got your guns, even if Purvis don't know it. Once clear of the house, you birds'll be plain captured bandits again."

Dean Hawk and Jim Brasher and Meat Polly rode slowly after the retreating lawmen. Tom Lashman had half-turned in his saddle, watching the outlaws intently. Then the six men had passed beyond the bend and the Purvis house was blotted out.

The marshal and his deputies fell in behind the gunmen.

Five minutes they rode in silence, then abruptly there were shots and Hawk and his pards wheeled. They saw Lashman and the deputies in a milling blur, slinging lead toward them. Strangely enough, the bullets seemed to go wide, as if not meant for the outlaws. Acting on inspiration, Dean Hawk nudged ahead his horse.

"Jim! Meat!" he yelped. "Spur them broncs like hell!"

The wiry animals responded as to galvanized current. In a few seconds, they were rapidly pulling away from the men behind. Hawk fished in his pocket, passed over his knife and freed Jim Brasher's wrists. Jim soon had Meat Polly loose.

'Hell's kitchen!" Polly exploded. "Was them lawskunks tryin' tuh burn us down in cold blood?"

Jim Brasher had a queer look on his bristly face. "It looked to me like they were shootin' pretty wild. Like they weren't tryin' to hit us at all."

Dean Hawk nodded, roweled. He had a strange tightness in his throat, not there from a bullet. Lashman and the rest were firing all right, but not at them. They were letting Dean Hawk, Jim Brasher, and Meat Polly go. That sounded loco, but it wasn't. Maybe Lashman would give them a headstart, fan after them in a few minutes. Maybe in an hour. Maybe not at all. Hawk wasn't arguing about that. What he realized was that all his hatred for the law was gone. Only a deep respect was left. Then and there Hawk resolved to go straight, as Cap and Dora Purvis believed him to be. He determined to force Jim and Meat likewise, if he had to slug them to do it.

Hawk straightened in his saddle. The girl would never know his past; that was the main thing. For the first time in his life, Dean Hawk had loved a woman and he thanked the Lord for it.

As the gunmen melted in the outlying hills, a slim figure in overalls slipped away from a group of men who were shooting. It was Dora Purvis, dressed like a man. In her right hand she held a gun and it was smoking. It was the gun which had fired close to Marshal Lashman and his deputies, drawing their attention from their prisoners and allowing the latter to escape.

The girl paused at the door of her father's house. She looked in the direction Satan's Trio had gone. There were tears in her wide blue eyes.

"Godspeed you, Hawk," she breathed. "Outlaw, gunman maybe, but one of the finest men that ever lived. I'll never let Dad know what I found, when I slipped over to the bank to help you."

She turned and went inside the cottage.

(THE END)

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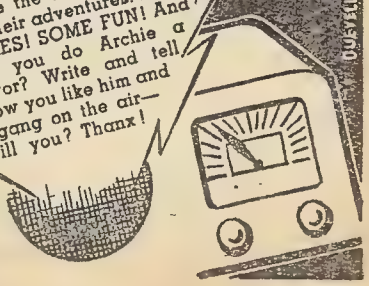

DUFFEL

CANDIDATE FOR BOOTHILL

By T. W. Ford

(Author of "The Kid Goes Killer," "Bounty Hunter's Reward," etc.)

When *Hondo Hugot recognized Duke Benoir at an inopportune moment, the cowhand virtually put a rope around his own neck!*

AS HE went down the alley to the livery stable, Hondo Hugot put a match to the quirly and sucked deep. It tasted good after that hearty breakfast he had just tucked away. Everything in life was good when a jasper didn't have a care in the world. Now he'd hit the saddle leather and push on back to the Rafter-T, be listening to old Rimfire Ponty's harmonica after dinner by tomorrow night. He grinned at the thought and reached for the latch of the smaller door in the main door of the barn. Then his round face sobered and his friendly eyes jerked wide with surprise. From the sounds, he realized a ruckus was building inside.

There was the sharp spatter of voices knife-edged with anger, blunt oaths, the staccato drumming of a

fast-moving man's boot heels. A liquor-thickened guffaw. Young Hugot shoved back his unruly tow-hued hair nervously as he hesitated outside. Then he thought of the livery barn proprietor, a sickly little man with a club foot: maybe the man needed help. Hugot pulled open the door, other hand on his staghorn gun butt as he peered into the dimness of the interior.

At first he could see nothing. Whoever was wrangling was out of sight around the line of stalls on that side of the big barn.

"You'd look right damn pretty with a hole in your head!" blasted one of the unseen speakers. The harsh sneering voice was vaguely familiar to Hondo Hugot.

"Mebbe, mebbe," came back the voice of a younger man, thin with strain. "But I got six of a kind in my own holster! And you'll be getting a few of 'em afore I go down, mister!"

"They's two of us, don't forgit," said another man.

"Sure," snapped back the younger man. "If either of you had been alone, I reckon you wouldn't uh packed the nerve to hit old Sukey!"

Hugot glided forward on tiptoe as he snaked the Colts from his holster, mentally cursing the creak of the floor planks under him. No gunfighter, he felt a little bit quaky inside. But he had to have a looksee. In the dimness, he cautiously poked his head around the side of the end stall to look down the alley running the width of the barn.

THERE was a groan as he did. It came from Sukey, the livery stable owner. He was trying to sit up on the straw of a stall where he had been knocked. And in the same instant, Hondo Hugot recognized the big drum-chested swaggering figure in the yellow silk shirt and conchaed chaps a few feet away. Despite the shadowy interior there was no mistaking the half-handsome brutal face and sleek black hair of Duke Benoir, arrogant owner of the big Umbrella outfit down in the Red Creek country where Hugot worked for the Rafter-T. Alleged by some to have ridden the owlhoot to acquire the wealth with which he'd bought the Umbrella, Benoir was rated the top gunslinger around Red Creek.

Now, Benois stood with his black-haired hands splayed over those topless breed holsters on his thighs. And he was glaring over a taunting smile at a bony half-pint ranny across the runway by the stalls on the other side of the barn. The other's small freckled face smirked boldly back at Benoir. Hugot could see the little fellow was just a beardless button, some local younker.

"You're a-begging for trouble," warned Duke Benoir.

The younker shook his head. "Nope. But I'm not gitting my boots run-over side-stepping it neither, by grab!"

There were two others on the scene. Some feet down from Benoir, sneering too, was his rotund moon-faced foreman, Castor—a one-time gunman. The fourth one was a barefooted kid in patched Levis, just a boy. With his freckled face, he was obviously the brother of the button fronting Duke Benoir.

"They's two of us," reminded Castor again, bared teeth gleaming faintly. "Two 'gainst yuh alone an'—"

"Don't, boys, don't," mumbled old Sukey as he pushed himself further off the floor of the stall. "Don't, please. I—"

IT WAS the boy, ignored by the three poised men, who made the play. Grabbing up an empty bucket, he leaped in at Castor from the side, swung it by the creaking handle, and bashed it down over the gunman-foreman's sombrero. There was a hollow thud and Castor slid down heavily to a sitting position.

Benoir's head jerked around and he snatched one hogleg from a thonged-down scabbard. "You dirty little pack-rat, I'll—"

"Hold it!" barked the freckle-faced button. "Pen that hogleg or I'll blast you!"

Benoir switched back to him, his own Colts nose just coming out of the holster top. And he saw the skin-

ny younker crouched with a gun sliding up fast from his single holster.

The unseen Hugot had his smokepole out and levered up, a little unsure how he was going to play it. There was a tension-freighted moment, then Duke Benoir's harsh laughter chopped out in the hushed barn.

"Tuck your tail 'tween your legs and make tracks, ya unweaned doggie," Benoir said as he let his gun slide back down into the holster. "Danged if I'm a-wasting lead on a locoed little coyote like you. I never shoot children." He pulled a sack of Bull from a shirt pocket.

The freckle-faced younker spat scornfully on the barn floor and threw a jeering laugh at Duke Benoir. "Stop blatting! I can smell a tinhorn when I cut his sign. You—"

Benoir thrust out his flushed face belligerently. "Know who I am, button? I'm Duke Benoir—Duke Benoir—from Red Creek! I could let daylight through you as quick as—"

"Never heard of you and don't give a hang, Benoir! Try putting some daylight through me. Go ahead—try it, you two-bit pelican!" Hand free of his reholstered gun, he started forward. "I socked you one for hitting old Sukey. And mebbe now I oughta give you a real rawhiding!"

THE watching Hondo Hugot figured it had to come then. Back in Red Creek, he had never heard anybody get away with half that much against the tempestuous dangerous Duke Benoir. He was rated a good man to steer clear of. And Benoir did dive a hand for a holster again.

Again the rannyhan spat on the floor. "Draw, by grab! I dare you to, you fourflushing gopher. Draw!"

Hugot couldn't believe his eyes. Benoir shot a glance to where Castor still sat. His segundo wasn't unconscious, but he was still blinking dazedly, plainly unable to side Benoir in a lead showdown. Then the sack of makings slipped from Benoir's shaking hands to the floor. And the man started to retreat into one of the stalls.

It was all over. Old Sukey hauled

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himself to his feet and bleated for them to stop. A stable hand pulled open the rear door of the barn as he came in from the feed lot. Avoiding the raging button's stare, Duke Benoir threw a bill at Sukey, went over and hauled Castor to his feet. A few moments later, the two of them headed out, leading their saddled ponies. And the button's mocking laughter rang after them without any retort from the backed-down Benoir. Hondo Hugot caught the reek of redeye from Benoir as he turned past the end stall for the door onto the alley.

The latter's eyes twisted to Hondo, were about to swing away. Then they widened and Benoir hesitated. Hondo Hugot made the mistake of nodding. Benoir said something under his breath as he recognized Hugot—a man from the Red Creek country. Stark venomous rage contorted Benoir's face a moment. Then he strode on by. . .

* * *

AS HE rode at a steady hand lope along the trail southward for the Red Creek country, Hondo Hugot couldn't get the thing out of his mind. He knew he had seen the famed Benoir eat crow when caught alone face to face with a mere younker on an even draw. It didn't seem possible.

Duke Benoir was the big potato back around Red Creek, boss of the range and a gent even the town marshal backed water from. Blustery and bellicose, Benoir was used to striding around and handing down his own personal edicts whenever it pleased him. He had been in three gunfights, twice killing his opponent.

But now. . .Hondo knuckled his chunky face and shook his head. It couldn't have been a double, or even some twin brother of Duke Benoir's. For Benoir had recognized him, Hondo Hugot, as he departed. Hondo thought he'd caught Benoir's whisper of his name as he stalked past.

He reached the crest of a rise between cutbanks and looked down at the little range town of Sosabee in the glow of the westering sun. He would be quit of the Red Creek country in a few more months. That mod-

(Continued On Page 90)

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(Continued From Page 88)

est account in the bank had been growing steadily. Soon he would be hitting out for the Mogollones to pick out his own little spread; trouble was the last thing Hondo wanted.

Before he moved on, he lifted his faded red neckerchief and mopped his face and dust-crusted lips. It came to him he hadn't had a bite of grub since he'd paused at that rock spring at midday. That was back where the stage turned north for Pine Wells. It had passed while he was hunkered down eating. The mule skinner had returned his wave with a brandish of his snakeskin whip. Hondo spoke to the bay pony and moved down the slope toward Sosabee, patting his checkered shirt over his stomach.

SOSABEE wasn't much of a town, a short main street with a handful of business establishments and houses straggling off down side roads toward the sage of the range. There were a few ponies scattered along the main street's hitch rails, a buckboard or two, and the team of a freighter's wagon taking water at the trough before the tiny adobe jailhouse. Smoke climbed lazily from the tin chimney leading up from the forge of the blacksmith's barn. It was a somnolent peaceful scene.

There was a single restaurant, but when Hondo drew abreast, he saw that it was boarded up with a "Closed—Owner Demised" sign on the door. A white-bearded man on the path beside the road told him he could get some grub at the barroom down past the jail.

Down there, Hondo swung off the bay under the shade of a huge eucalyptus tree, pausing to beat the dust from his warped gray sombrero against his leg. As he glanced up, he saw a figure lounging in the doorway of another saloon across the road and down a piece. Hondo only glimpsed him, a lean figure with his face shadowed by a flat-brimmed Stetson. The next moment the man had jerked back inside the batwings of the place as if, perhaps, somebody in there had called him. Hondo frowned a moment, then remembered his stomach.

The place he entered was low-ceiled, redolent of stale beer and fried food. There were a few tables set along the other wall; an opened backdoor showed a segment of yard with a heap of rusting tin cans and a couple of chickens pecking about desultorily. When he got seated at one of the tables, the barkeep-boss came over, allowed as how he might be able to fix up a mess of chow.

"Hear anything 'bout the stage hold-up?" he asked. Shrugged when Hondo said he hadn't and clumped off to the rear. When he returned briefly, the rider ordered a drink.

ABRUPTLY, Hondo had the uneasy feeling that he was being watched. He turned sideward to cut his eyes at the front door. There was nobody there. As he turned back, he noted the window opening on an alley at the other side of the barroom; Hondo caught the shadow on the wall of the next door building, the shadow of a man retreating down the alley.

A couple of minutes passed and he drained his glass of redeye, then became aware of low-toned guarded voices from the sidewalk out front. When they persisted and he realized the speakers weren't moving by, he looked out again. Three pair of eyes were staring over the top of the batwings at him. They continued to keep on staring when he eyed them, too. Finally two of the faces moved away and a man called from down the road.

Then the dour-faced boss came plunking back with a pot of java and a tin plate of greasy food. Hondo was just picking up his knife when somebody outside barked: "That's him in there, all right. It's him. Got a red neckerchief and a checked shirt an' all! 'S him!"

For a moment, the significance of it failed to hit Hondo Hugot. Then he noted his own checked shirt and remembered too that his neckerchief had been bright red when it was new. He froze, wind choking in his throat. It was locoed; he hadn't done anything. He—

The batwings divided before the entrance of a big tall man in rusty

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black. Long sagging mustachios decorated his face and a lawman's star his coat. He was Carker, town marshal. A smaller man, vaguely familiar to Hondo, skulked half behind him. Both had their eyes pinioned on Hondo Hugot and the marshal pushed a heavily veined hand to the Colts hidden under his coat tail. Behind other hands held the swinging doors wide and Hondo could see the bunch of men blotting out all view of the road itself.

"That's him," piped the wizened-faced one behind the marshal. "Yep! I'm dead sure! He's the rider what come busting down the trail just before we found the stage held up!"

The marshal shoved a hand backward to hush his babble. "Stranger, I'm arresting you on a charge of holding up the Pine Springs stage and—" he started off in a dry authority-harshened voice.

"Hey, Hugot!" It was a sharp quick call from outside the window giving onto the alley at the other side of the barroom.

WHEN Hondo flicked his eyes there it was to see a man in the dusk of the alley, standing back from the window so he was not visible to the marshal. But very clear was the steely outline of the hogleg the man had pointed right at the seated Hondo Hugot. The latter glimpsed his globe of face. Then Hondo was free of the chair, skating sideward as he whipped a hand to his holster and up.

"Don't draw, you fool! I got you covered!" the marshal bawled as he came across the floor. "I'll blast you to—"

Young Hondo was so excited he wasn't quite sure what happened. It was the roar of his gun that wiped out the marshal's words. The blast of the shot triggered in self defense. He remembered cocking the hammer again, then swinging around as the sense of the marshal's words impinged on his brain. The hammer slipped from beneath his sweating thumb. There was a double crash as his weapon and another spoke almost together, as if one shot had bounced off the other.

(Continued On Page 94)

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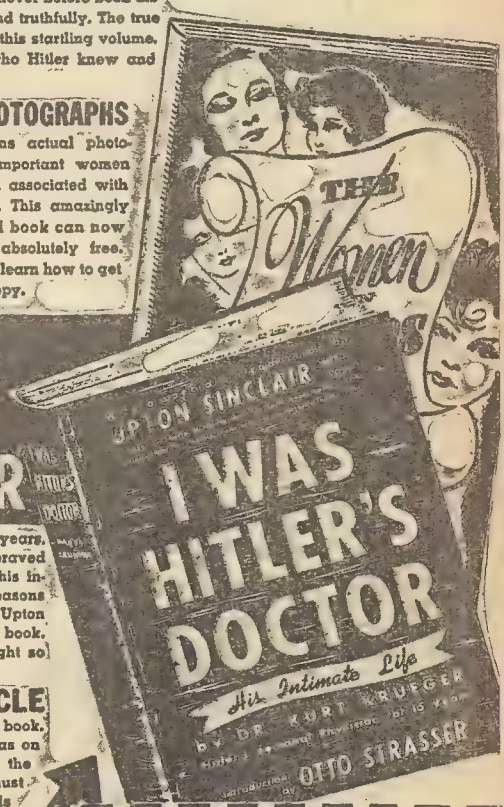

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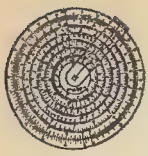

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(Continued From Page 92)

One of Carker's legs was knocked out from under him. He went up on the toe of the other boot, twisting in agony before he pitched backward. Two men jumped inside the batwings and caught him, dragged him outside. A shout swept down the little main street.

"He got the marshal! He got the marshal!. . ."

THERE was no time for thinking or weighing then. By instinct, he wheeled and shattered the hanging lamp with two slugs. For a moment he listened to the milling of them out front. Then he ran back into the kitchen at one side in the rear before they could infiltrate into the alley and get him on the flank.

The owner was crouched under a table; Hondo paused to send a puff of breath down the chimney of the lamp there and extinguish it. Then he went through the door into the rubble-filled back yard; he saw the outside stairs that slanted up the back of the place to a room built on the roof. Without thinking, he slipped up it on tiptoe so the proprietor wouldn't be able to tell them which way he'd gone.

A shot snapped from in the alley. Hondo was already letting himself into the single room above. The rectangle of a window showed in the front of it, showed the expanse of the rest of the roof of the little one-story place. Hondo was through the window and stepping lightly forward along the roof. A welter of noise boiled from the road up forward.

But Hondo was measuring the distance of the adjoining roof of the building on the left. It was a four-five foot jump and a little higher than th top of the barroom. He gambled and hurtled off the saloon, scrambled onto the other. He flashed a look back over his shoulder down into the alley; apparently nobody had seen him.

"Joe, you got that line of boys around the back there yet? He still must be inside, the dirty coyote!"

Hondo Hugot worked as silently as he could over the tar-paper covered second roof. There was no store beside the roof he was on, but set back

from the road was a little flat-roofed cabin. It was about seven feet distant. He swung into the top of a young tree between the two places, then reached the top of the cabin. Doubled now, he made it to the other side of the cabin.

There was an open plot of ground on the far side, rank with reeds and brush. Hesitating but a moment, Hondo leaped from the roof and landed on all fours. Tensed, listening, he waited a long moment after he landed. Apparently nobody had spotted him down that way. He moved to the front toward the road. A cold lump was like a rock in his belly as realization crept over him. He had put a chunk of lead in a John Law. He hadn't held up any stage; but now he was in for it if they gave him a catching, in for it bad.

AT THE front of the plot, he pushed out his sombreroless he. cautiously. Down before the barroom, the throng was pushed back in an arc on the opposite side of the road. Seven-eight spread out men, guns drawn, were covering the front of the place, waiting while those around to the rear prepared to rush it. One of them shifted, passing through a beam of light from a store beyond the barroom. The watching Hondo's mouth jerked open. He recognized the yellow shirt and arrogant face of Duke Benoir. Then he got a glimpse of the faces of two men working close to Benoir; both he placed as Umbrella hands of that gunman spread Benoir had hired himself.

Then it dawned on the crouched Hondo. It was Benoir, working to take care of him so he would never return to Red Creek with the story of what he had seen in that livery barn that morning. With him a fugitive, a wanted man, it would be perfectly legal for anybody—including one of Benoir's spread—to drill him. A bead of sweat like a trickling drop of icy water ran down the cowhand's jaw.

"I'm sure up Mud Creek with a matchstick fer a paddle," he breathed. His one hope was to grab

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himself a pony and hit for the open range.

In the thickening darkness, he edged his body from the foliage and shoved a boot ahead in the deep grass. His boot struck something round and hard. A rock, he figured, and sidestepped to leap onto the planks of the sidewalk. Before he had taken another stride, there was an outraged bellow smack on his heels. And an orey-eyed gent, who had dropped into the open space to sleep it off, sat up in the grass, cursed at the top of his lungs.

It was Hondo's undoing as he stood anchored to the sidewalk in astonishment a moment. Then they were swinging around down at the barroom and had sighted him. He threw himself across the road, flying boots churning up the alkali, toward a hammerhead at a hitchrail opposite. He made it, tearing free the reins and hitting the leather. Half wheeling the animal, he threw the gut-hooks to it and slammed down the road.

But the caterwauling of the drunk in the grass had brought a white-haired man to the door of his house, a Colts in his hand. Seeing the fleeing rider as he drew abreast, the old-timer levelled and fired with the weapon steadied over a crooked forearm. Bent low over the animal's neck, Hondo felt no hot bite of a bullet even though he was but a few yards from the man in the doorway. The cayuse seemed to trip over something in the dust, then got its head up and flung on along.

WILD shots spattered from down by the barroom, the reports punctuating the senseless shouting. Hondo's heart leaped with hope. Out of the dimness ahead the vague forms of a couple of riders appeared. But the cowhand sawed on the neck reins and swung the cayuse to the left down one of the town's little side streets. The animal answered the reins but swayed heavily as it hit into the turn and down into a shallow hollow. Then it was slowing on suddenly drunken legs, head sinking and unresponsive to Hondo's

(Continued On Page 98)

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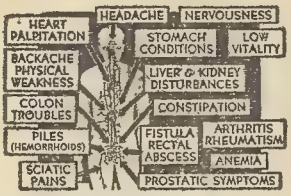

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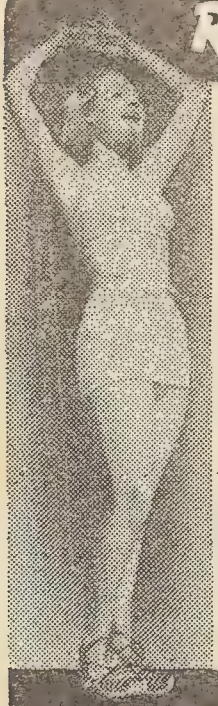

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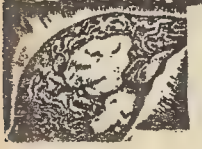

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(Continued From Page 96)

dull-rowelled spurs. It careened—senselessly to the left, as if shying at some unseen spectre in the thickening cloak of night.

The next moment Hondo Hugot knew the spectre was Death. The man firing from the doorway hadn't missed; he had hit the pony mortally. Kicking free of a stirrup, Hondo just had time to throw himself clear before the pony plunged onto its head, half somersaulted, and crashed into the weeds of the gutter. Hondo kept running blindly, straight ahead down the sandy track, locoed as he realized he was on the verge of capture.

The track seemed to turn a silvery blue before him. Then he realized it was the chunk of pale glassy moon edging over the saw-toothed ridge to the north. In that light, a man out on the open flats ahead would be as plain as a black fly walking over white oilcloth. It brought him back to his senses. He cut over to hide himself in the shadow of a small tree. Looking back he was just in time to see the first mounted men in pursuit come plunging down from the main road.

But he was saved momentarily. In a last spasm of strength, the dying cayuse had struggled up and lurched off the right side of the track and over the crest of a brush-dotted dune beside an old shed. The lead rider saw the horse's hind quarters disappearing past the shack and cut off after it.

HONDO sleeved sweat from his forehead and glided from the tree up into the scrub growth on the little slope that side of the trail. Darting from clump to clump of brush, doubled over, scuttling like a jack-rabbit, he reached the top unseen. Then he threw himself flat just in time. Men afoot had cut behind the buildings fronting the main street and were hustling at an angle down toward the side track.

"Proved he's guilty allright by throwin' down on the marshal!" one of them said as he loped by within six feet of Hondo hugging the earth beside a log. "Innercent hombre would've given himself up!"

The cold logic of it made Hondo writhe inside. But back in that barroom, things had happened so fast he hadn't had time to think straight. And the round-faced figure in the alley with the hogleg aimed smack dab at him had—It struck him then; he placed that face. The moonlike visage belonged to Castor, Duke Benoir's segundo-gunman!

The steps of the running men faded on the muffling sand of the slope, but when he lifted his head again, preparatory to rising, he jerked it back down into the sand quickly. A handful of townsmen, bared guns shimmering in the moon glow, stood up there in a backyard, waiting for others to recapture him and bring him back.

A trembling coursed through the fugitive's body and down his long legs. But he managed to fight off the panic; for the first time he noticed the dark little cabin crouched under the pine some thirty odd feet away along the top of the slope.

Gun clutched in one hand, ready to leap up and make a last stand for his life if spotted, Hondo bellied over the sand toward the place. Then he was beneath the canopy of the gloomy pine and swinging on all fours toward the front door. His heart seemed to be floating in his throat as he tried the door. He couldn't break in; the noise would bring them down on him in a flash. But the knob turned and the door swung inward at his pressure.

When he got it closed behind him, he let out his breath and shook the big bead of sweat from his chin. "Whew!"

"HOT CRAWLIN' up that hill on your belly, wasn't it?" And with the voice from behind came the jab of a round steel-hard gun muzzle in his back. "Saw you coming all the way. What're them gophers after you fer? You the one who put the slug in the marshal's leg, huh?"

Hondo swallowed over a lump of disappointment blocking his throat. He was fixed for fair now. "Reckon I did hit the marshal. They—they

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say I held up the Pine Springs stage. I didn't. But I lost my head and—"

The other whistled softly as he reached past Hondo and pulled back the curtain from a window. Moonlight flowed in. The other ordered Hondo to drop his hogleg on the table and turn around. When the fugitive obeyed, he saw a little stooped gray-haired man. He had a craggy face with a jaw like a ledge of rock, but beneath the eaves of the bulging brows were a pair of keen and kindly eyes. It was plain that rheumatism had wracked his body.

"Hmmm. . . .Don't have the cut of no road agent to me. Don't look ornery enough, I'd say. Never can tell though," he went on in the easy voice devoid of belligerence he had used from the first. "Some of the most wire-hard birds sings the softest. . . .An innercent man wouldn't uh had to plug—"

"They're locoed! I never held up no stage," Hondo cut him off. "Some hairpin was throwing down on me from the alley and—and I went haywire, I reckon. Somebody's a-trying to git me." Without knowing why except that it would do him no good anyway, he blurted out the story about Duke Benoir.

"Hmmm. . . .Where you from, ranny?"

"Over Red Creek way. Work for the Rafter-T there."

"A likely story, mebbe. . . .Who you know in the Rafter-T bunkhouse?"

"What the hell difference—well, they's Slice Thorens and. . ."He named a few more. "And ol' Rimfire Ponty! Sure wish that harmonica-playing galoot was siding me now," he added fervently.

The other's eyes had sharpened. "Mebbe he'd say your story wouldn't hold no more water 'n a busted hat, neither!"

"Rimfire's my pard. He knows I ain't no snaky owl hooter. *He'd* side me 'gainst the devil er any tin badge packer that ever stepped!"

The other lowered his Colts and stuck out his hand, smiling. "That's

(Continued On Page 102)

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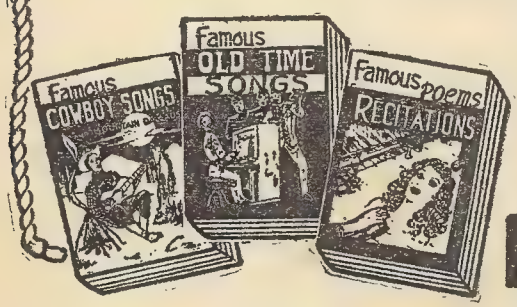

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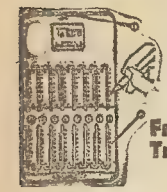

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(Continued From Page 100)

all right with me then. If that ring-tailled no-good ol' rannyhan says you're all right, you *must* be, by grab!"

"You know Rimfire Ponty?" cried Hondo.

"Shh-h. . . .Them outside. . . .Reckon I oughta, seeing as how we're cousins and was brought up together like brothers. . . .No, we gotta figure, Hugot, how to git you outa this tight. . . ."

BREATHLESS, Hondo sagged back against the table a moment. It was almost too good to believe. Now he was no longer a hounded lone wolf, friendless in a strange piece of country. Plucking at his lower lip, Greg Ponty weighed the idea of Hondo giving himself up to the marshal, Carker.

Hondo was learning fast. He shook his head. "That Benoir and his pack would gun me on sight. . . 'Sides, they got somebody to swear they saw me holding up that stage. I got nobody who can prove where I was. Nope. I ain't giving up to rot inside some jail walls. . . .If you could git me a pony. . . ."

Greg Ponty pursed his mouth. "Still wouldn't have much chance. They'll be combing the whole countryside for you, Hondo. They—" He broke off as the sound of pony hoofs came from the track down at the bottom of the slope. A look from the window showed the mounted men milling around down below. They had come upon Hondo's dead pony and swung back.

"Hells bells, the dang coyote can't git far afoot! Let's comb ever' danged last inch of this brush!"

Greg Ponty swung back to the cowhand. "Sooner or later they'll be up this way. Thing to do is git you outa here. I know. I'll put you in the jailhouse. It's the last place they'd look. They—" He held up a hand as Hondo started to protest. "Wait! She'll be all right. I'm the town jailor. I can git you in—and out."

A few moments later, they were slipping away from the cabin, cloaked in the shadow of the big pine as

they moved away from the edge of the slope. Greg Ponty led the way along a little path angling over toward the main road. Nobody was lurking behind the buildings now. Hondo dropped behind a stump when they got to the rear of the low four-square jailhouse. At the back door, he inserted a key, then waved the fugitive in when he had it opened up.

Inside, Ponty picked a lantern from the floor and got the wick burning low. He chuckled when the sound of faint padding footsteps came from the marshal's office in the front of the structure.

"Don't worry none, Hondo. That's only poor Si Fagin, the hoeman from out on the Pine Springs road." Fagin, he explained, was a little touched in the head, but harmless, ever since he had landed on his skull after being thrown from a horse a year or so ago. Occasionally he got hallucinations. "Then he gits to believing some mysterious gents are out to drill him. An' he comes inta town and begs us with tears in his eyes to put him in the cuartel so they canin't git at him. It's a little sad. He's crippled too."

THERE were just two cells in the rear half of the place, with a corridor running forward between them. The doors of both cells were open.

"I'll git you a coupla blankets from the office, Hondo. Then you can roll under one of the bunks in either cell. Nobody'd ever dream a wanted man would bust inta the jailhouse to hide out."

He pulled open the door leading into the front office and the beam of the lamp sprayed through to reveal Fagin. A gaunt gray-haired man, he wheeled on the pivot of his crutch to face them, blinking. He had removed his boots but had on his sombrero, a big battered ant-hill style of Mex hat. A flaming red shirt hung unbuttoned over his hollow chest, the tails draping outside his pants. When he saw Greg Ponty, he laid a finger over his lips for silence.

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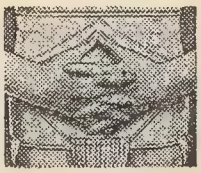

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"Shhh-h," he whispered hoarsely. "They were snooping around outside afore. . . .Took off my boots so they couldn't hear me. . . .Hey, who's that with ya? I know, I know. He's one of them. He's one of their damn spies! Ponty, ya gotta pertect me er—" His voice broke into a whine.

The jailor gave him a friendly slap on the back. "Don't tell me ya forgot my son so soon, Si?. . . .Sure, you 'member him now. He's going to help me protect you. Now you git back in a cell and catch some shuteye." He steered him through the door and the mildly demented man tapped meekly to the rear on his crutch. "Danged shame," Ponty said as he put the lantern atop Carker's rolltop desk. "When he's right in his head, he's a dang smart friendly fella. Now—them blankets."

It was Hondo himself, standing back in the dimness of the corridor, who saw them first. From his position he could see the road through the small iron-barred window in the jail's front door. The shade was drawn over the front window. And he spotted the little bunch of riders as they drew up in the road just outside, swinging legs out of the saddles. Duke Benoir's yellow shirt was unmistakable in the bright moonlight.

"We're a-going to smoke him out or I'm a first cousin to a lowdown sheepherder!" Benoir snorted as his boot heels rattled on the little walk up to the jail steps.

HONHO just had time to jump backward and swing shut the door onto the corridor. He backed and turned into one of the cells, leaving the heavy iron door open just a crack so he could hear the proceedings. The butt of his cocked gun was slippery in his hot sweating palm as he waited, listening.

There was the rumble of several voices, intermixed with the shuffling of boots as men entered, from the front office. Then Hondo heard Ponty asking where the marshal was. Somebody said he was down at his house getting his bullet-nicked leg bandaged up.

"And he's appointed Cuyler here acting marshal in his absence," said Benoir. Cuyler, a reedy-voiced man, stammering with excitement, said that was so. "Now what we gotta do is git some action right off," Benoir went on arrogantly. "That polecat ain't far and—"

There was a loud shattering cough from the cell in which Hondo Hugot waited. The latter whirled to see Fagin stretched on the cot in the corner. The moonlight slanting in the window showed his naked torso and the red shirt draped over the back of the chair beside the cot.

"Who the hell's that?" roared Benoir as somebody else pulled open the door from the front room.

"Don't be a danged idjiot," Greg Ponty came back calmly. "It's that Fagin from on the Pine Springs road, the fella what's touched in the head. You saw him when you was in here afore."

"Oh, him. Now I say—"

Some of the others broke in, everybody talking at once. Then Cuyler's thin piping finally got some order. "Listen, gents. We all know who Mr. Benoir from over Red Creek way is. I—I th-think we should hear wh-what he has to say."

"What I say is this!" Benoir grabbed the reins quickly. "We picked up his sign on that slope, heading back into town here. So he's gotta be here somewheres. Ain't a chance of him getting out now with my boys posted all round the town. So we gotta smoke him out."

"How, Mr. Benoir?" said Cuyler.

"He's most likely holed up in some house. Maybe the folks in it don't even know it. Maybe he slipped in. He might even be drifting around in the alleys or shifting from one spot to another. I say we should go down to the end of the road, then go through one place after the other right to the other end of the town. Like we was curry-combing it. We cain't miss him then."

"He'll be desperate—backed up agin the wall! And he's still armed," put in Cuyler fearfully.

Duke Benoir guffawed. "I'll lead

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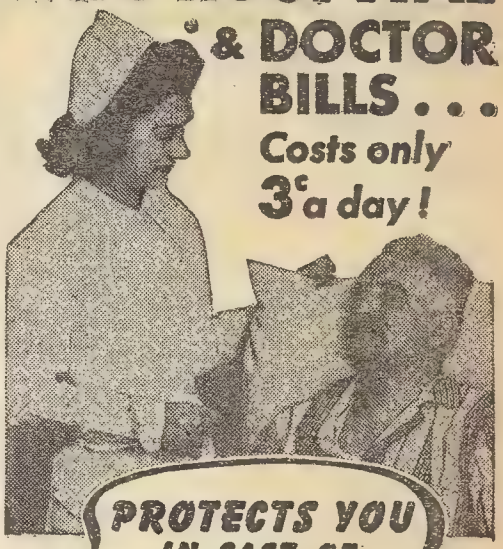

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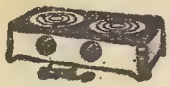

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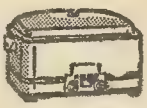

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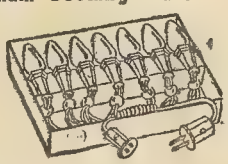

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your men, marshal! And we won't skip a danged place! Come on!" The front door thumped against the wall as he jerked it open, the swaggering menacing gunfighter Red Creek knew. "Come on, Castor! I'll blast down that gunning rat personally!"

THE eavesdropping Hondo felt that cold lump forming inside him again. With the Benoir gunslicks ringing the town, he'd never get out. And sooner or later, they would locate him in the jail. Duke Benoir had to or was doomed himself. If that story of him eating crow got back to Red Creek, he'd have to drag his tail out of the country. No question of it. He—

Old Fagin on the cot behind him shifted again, mumbling in his sleep. Hondo shot him a look, taking in the yellow crutch, gleaming in the moonlight, propped beside the bed. And then the idea hit him as he recalled that Ponty had said this Fagin lived up on the Pine Springs road. That was where the stage had been held up. Hondo rubbed his dry lips indecisively. It was a long-shot gamble, but his hunch was strong. After all, he knew he himself had not stopped the stage coach. But—but Duke Benoir's outfit seemed to know all about it too danged well. A long-shot chance. . . .

"Git back in there, you danged idjiot!" husked Greg Ponty when Hondo started to come out of the back corridor. "One of 'em might drop back in and—" Then he stood slack-jawed when he saw the outfit on Hondo.

Jammed low on his head, the wide brim blacking out his features in shadow, was Fagin's Mexican hat. Pulled on over his own checked one was the demented man's flaming red shirt. And propped under his left armpit was the yellow crutch. Ponty eyed the kid suspiciously as if perhaps *he* might have gone locoed too. Then he tried to block him off as Hondo headed for the door.

"Don't, Ponty! Let me go. I'm calling that Benoir for a showdown and—"

(Continued On Page 108)

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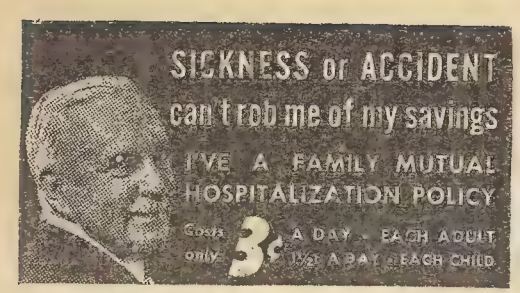
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(Continued From Page 106)

"Hondo! He's a tophand gunslinger and he'll—"

But Hondo Hugot shook his head as he reached the front door and yanked it open and swung out onto the three steps leading down from the jail. Everything on the road stood out clearly in the lucid bluish moonlight. Down just a few yards from the jail building, Benoir was bawling orders, telling a couple of men to get down to the other end of the town to keep watch if the fugitive should appear as he was forced out of some house. "Now we'll git down to the other end and start on that first place and—"

"Mr. Benior!" sang out Hondo in a muffled voice as he came hobbling down the path from the jail. "Just a minute. . . ."

They turned, pausing as they moved away. All they saw, apparently, was old Fagin, the locoed one. One of the men addressed Hondo as "Fagin" and told him to go back inside till he felt better.

"I feel all right now," Hondo answered. "Right fine. . . .Mr. Benoir, I saw you out on the Pine Springs road."

BENOIR'S head thrust forward as he stiffened guardedly. He stood off a piece from the others, the moon-faced Castor at his left hand. "What the devil are you gitting at?" he hollered, hands hovering just over his gun butts.

The bellowing of Benoir was the tipoff to Hondo that his hunch was correct. Tap-tapping with that crutch, he came on, the only moving figure in the tableau beneath the moon. "Benoir, I saw ya out there! By gum, I did." Tension put a crack in his voice. "It was right after the stage holdup—and I saw you and your bunch go slamming down the road, Benoir!"

Duke Benoir's legs were already sliding wide in the gunman's crouch. Even as he tried to deny the insinuation, his body movements were giving him away. "You danged lying fool! Shut up—or I'll blast your good leg out from under ya and—"

(Continued On Page 110)

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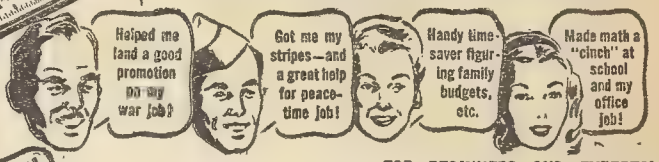
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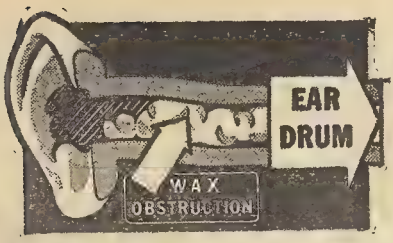

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(Continued From Page 108)

"I think you held up the stage, Benoir. . . .and don't call me a liar or I'll draw on yuh!"

"Fagin—you're locoed! You—" somebody screamed.

But Benoir lost his head and hooked the hoglegs from his holsters. Castor was levering up a gun too. But Hondo had already snatched up his shooting iron. "You're a yella-livered tinhorn of a fourflusher, Benoir! Just like you showed in that livery barn up the line!"

That broke Benoir. His eyes twisted around wildly like those of a cornered animal. He hesitated, backtracking, the sand running out of him. Too late, seeing no escape, he hit the triggers, and Hondo's gun blurted flame as the crutch fell away from him. Benoir stopped lead in a leg and crashed down. He banged into Castor, his gun ace, as the latter tried to draw bead. Castor's bullet zinged high over Hondo's head.

The gunman scuttled sideward to run around the end of a hitch rack across the road where were tethered two ponies. Using them as a shield, he sent another slug that gouged alkali where Hondo had been standing. But, as the big Mex sombrero flew off, Hondo had flung himself to the right. Then he was down on one knee and very calmly working the trigger twice. He fired under the belly and between the legs of one of the horses standing broadside to the rail. There was a howl of pain from Castor and the smack of his body collapsing on the wooden sidewalk over there.

"LOOK out, Hondo!" roared Greg Ponty from the jail door as Hondo rushed across the road. The cowhand twisted to see the prone Benoir propping up an elbow to get in a sneak shot from behind. The fugitive's gun mouth bled reddishly again. And Benoir rolled spasmodically once, kicking, then flattened in the dust, a piece of lead in the back of his head. Hondo leaped on to cover Castor.

"I give up! I g-give up," bleated the gunman as he writhed on his side with a smashed thigh.

(Continued On Page 112)

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(Continued From Page 110)

"Give up—hell!" stormed Hondo Hugot. "I'm putting out your dang light pronto!" He thrust at the man with his smoking gun aimed at his forehead. "You dirty lying—"

"Fer Gawd's sakes, d-don't—don't!" Castor whined shrilly. "Y-yeah, we—ww-e stuck up that stage! One of us put on a checked shirt and—and—" He passed out. But when he was carried into the barroom where the thing had started and administered some redeye, he blurted the rest of it in a desperate attempt to save himself.

"Should have smelled a rat when I fust cut their sign," said a voice from the batwings as Castor finished. It was Carker, the town marshal, hobbling in on his nicked leg with the aid of a cane.

Hondo galvanized, then dropped his hand away from his holster. He would undoubtedly have to face charges for having gunned the John Law. Carker read the gesture and gave him a grin, then patted the head of a yellow-haired boy who'd stepped in beside him.

"Don't worry, Hugot! Young Tad Cuyler here was peeping in a winda on the other side of this place when it happened. He says it was Castor who drilled me—not you!"

Hondo let out a sigh of relief like a kettle steaming. And he fully understood for the first time. Benoir h... been slick. He had stacked the deck to add the charge of wounding a badge-packer.

"But what I'd like to know," went on Carker, glaring at old Greg Ponty with mock severity, "is how this Hugot had the free run of my jailhouse, by grab! Well, Ponty?"

Ponty rubbed his chin. "The dang rannyhan rammed a gun halfway through my backbone, Cark, and, by grab—he even threatened to go down to Red Creek and blast that no-good cousin of mine, Rimfire Ponty! He had a knife a-tickling my ribs, too, and when he beat me over the head with that crutch an'—an'. . ."

(THE END)

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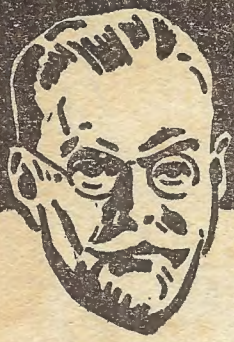

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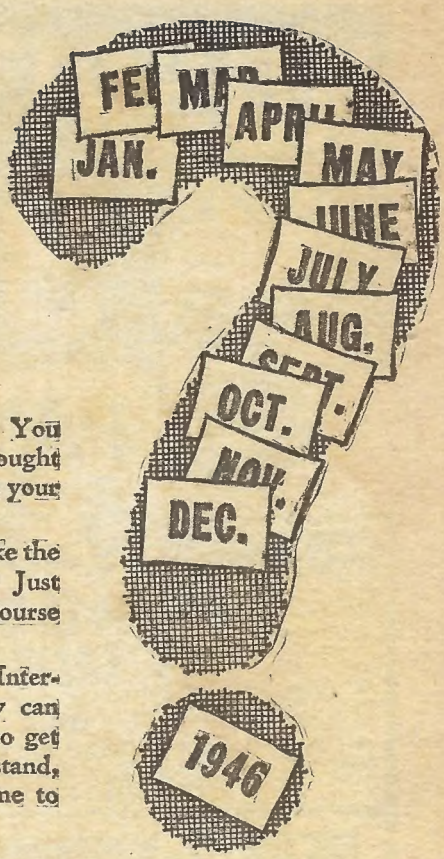

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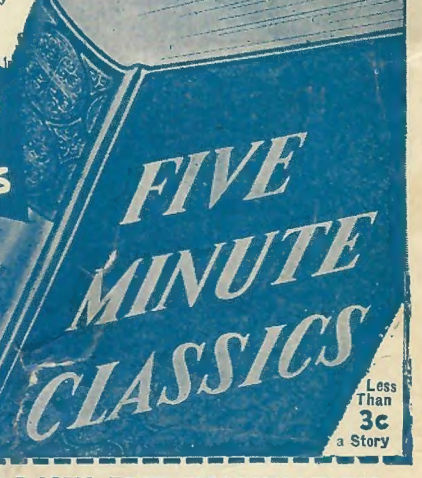

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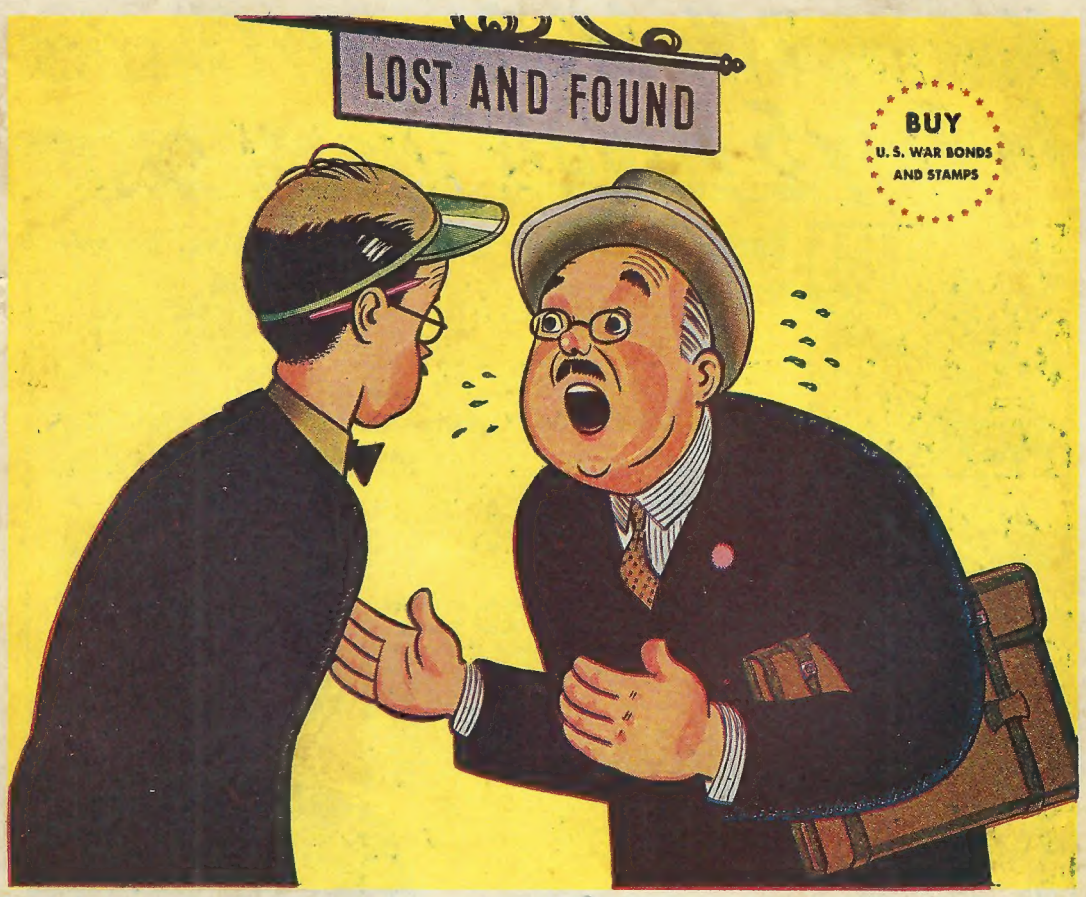

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